

Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir

by Midoriko-sama

Category: How to Train Your Dragon

Genre: Adventure, Family

Language: English

Characters: Astrid, Hiccup, Stoick

Pairings: Hiccup/Astrid

Status: Completed

Published: 2014-01-24 19:15:50

Updated: 2014-08-14 14:17:55

Packaged: 2016-04-26 17:34:44

Rating: T

Chapters: 23

Words: 121,591

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: People often wondered what kept Hiccup going during those early years. When that single, most-treasured thing is taken from him, there is little left to keep him on Berk. The day Stoick returns, and the day before the best recruit is finally chosen, Hiccup leaves Berk; little knowing that he would one day return under ... strange circumstances. H/A, R/F, rated for violence.

1. Prologue 1 - Present

****Welcome, everyone. It's been quite a while since I've published anything here. Foxy-girl managed to coax me into putting this up ****after I shared the document with her ****(despite me feeling it was rather superfluous as it is just another instance of a different turn in the original tale), so â€| thank her if you like it, and blame her if you don't!****

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1_

**Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir**

* * *

><p>Present

Astrid became a woman the same day she was to enter the Arena for dragon training the first time. Her mother had looked at her with a judging eye, but nodded. Her father had looked at her with pride before he boarded the ships to search for the nest. Astrid had taken it as a clear sign; her childhood was over, for good or for ill. She was an adult now, who needed to shoulder that responsibility, or be crushed by it. And Astrid knew the way the Hofferson clan went; no Hofferson had ever gone down without a fight.

She had been in horrible pain the whole time. She felt hot, cold, sweaty and clammy, and she had not known her lower belly to ever twist into such agonising knots, even when she'd eaten rotten shell-fish on a dare. But her challenge was clear, and she'd be haunted by Loki himself before she let herself surrender. Her mother was always ready for her at the end of the day with hot compresses and brews, fresh rags and warm arms and fires, so she didn't see that she had anything to complain about.

That is, of course, until they faced the nadder. Fending off both the dragon and the stupid boy trying to talk to her all the time, on top of the pain, had brought her to the brink of her tolerance. Her lower belly felt the worse it had yet, and Snotlout would not shut up and go away. The nadder itself was no walk on the beach either; it was sharp, alert, precise and quick. In any other situation, Astrid may have actually enjoyed being pitted against the proud creature, because danger with no challenge was not worth its salt, and this dragon set her blood racing with the excitement of a good hunt. Together with her discomfort, her sluggish, shivering body, and the gadfly of a Jorgensen, however, it left her in a foul temper.

So it was that when she landed on the foolish boy, who tried to be inconveniently kind instead of pushing her off to get them both disengaged and escaping, she had no patience left to speak of. As soon as her adrenaline faded from blindly swinging the shield-embedded axe at approaching foot-long teeth, she whirled on the ridiculously cowering boy with the same viciousness of the reptile.

"Is this some sort of a game to you?" she hissed. "Our parents' war is about to become ours." She took a breath, her lower belly gave a vindictive spasm, as if the dragon had bitten into her, and the cowering form of Hiccup on the floor suddenly became unsupportable. He hadn't a scratch on him, hadn't a bruise, but there he was as if he'd been hit and had a right to be resting. What right had he, when she was in so much pain! "It's no wonder your father is so ashamed of you!"

The arena went quiet, even more so than the post-battle lull. Hiccup was still for a few seconds, looking at her with wide, shocked eyes, before something changed in them. He pushed himself off the floor and stood straight enough to almost reach her height, then, with more strength than she'd given him credit for, shoved her in the shoulders.

"That's not true. Dad loves me; don't you dare speak ill of my father again," he hissed at her, his eyes narrow and cold. The kind, mild and ineffective person she was used to seeing wasn't there, and it shocked her for a moment, that this hard-eyed man was hiding behind the spineless boy. But no Hofferson would get shoved and let it slide. She punched him in the stomach, hard, and enjoyed watching him go down with a groan.

"I'd only be speaking ill of him if it wasn't the truth. What's there to be proud of, Hiccup Haddock? All you do is make messes for the rest of us to clean up and get sent to your house in disgrace. Which father wouldn't be proud of that!"

Hiccup flinched, glaring at her violently with gritted teeth and

straightened himself. His eyes had gone even stonier " it was almost like looking at Stoick himself for a moment " but then he huffed at her and turned his back, leaving the arena stiff-backed without saying a word. Gobber gave her a stern talking-to about teamwork and holding her tongue and being respectful to their chief, but Astrid was too busy looking after Hiccup, and seething.

Hiccup's answer had come in the most unexpected way, and proved he was a worthy opponent by being the soundest blow possible. Slowly, but surely, Hiccup had stopped being the useless toothpick who always got chased around and wasted the training session asking pointless questions, and began overtaking her in skill and dexterity against the dragons. Even worse, when she decided to confront him directly, he was never there; he came to training, left them all far behind and gaping, diverted their talk and questions with mild manners and kind words and then disappeared for good. He seemed to have forgiven Astrid her indiscrete tongue, but she wasn't stupid. She hadn't forgotten the look on his face, so different and so much more determined, and this was too perfect a way to get revenge on her to be a coincidence.

Her father made it worse when he returned; he laughed uproariously instead of being outraged alongside her that the honour which seemed almost divinely ordained for her had been snatched away by someone like Hiccup. Stoick's stock had finally come to fruit, he'd laughed; about time too, but he supposed it was Stoick's own fault for keeping the boy from what was obviously his true calling all these years. It wasn't a shame to be beaten by a Haddock, he said, they weren't the leading bloodline and chief clan for nothing after all. It was like losing Thawfest to the Jorgenson clan " annoying, but not surprising.

Beyond the relief to have her father back safely and her first woman's blood gone, Astrid had been outraged at her father's attitude. Hadn't he taught her that every challenge must be met and surmounted, or it would bury you? Hadn't he been the one who drove her to be the best there ever could be, so that she would always have first pick and choice in all the most important things? No, Astrid Hofferson was not done fighting " nor was she done seething.

And it was so that when she saw her opportunity, she sunk her nails in it deep. Coming up into her room, she immediately noted something amiss " sharp eyes caught first a folded piece of parchment on her bed, then an open window she knew to have closed. Rushing to it, she immediately noted the retreating figure of her rival in the sparse moonlight and without a second thought, threw herself out the window to follow.

It was no easy feat; Hiccup was more adapt at stealth than she gave him credit for " another surprise, but she supposed it was an advantage to his slight body. She thanked the gods that she was a skilled hunter, and managed to keep track of him without making noise as he entered the forest and navigated the undergrowth expertly.

Then, suddenly, she lost sight of him as if the earth had swallowed him and she almost cursed out loud until she heard his voice. Moving cautiously, she edged towards what she realised to be a ravine, and saw a wide, deep opening, circular, only illuminated by the sickle moon's reflection on a lake of water within. Getting closer was no

easy feat, but she found an opening that lead into the cove, and edged her way in until her back hit a boulder she thought he was close to. Astrid sacrificed seeing the boy â€" sense with which she could do nothing much between the darkness and distance â€" to hear what he was saying.

"Yeah, I'm glad to see you tooâ€¦ good, huh?" There was a strange noise, like someone smacking their lips noisily. Hiccup chuckled â€" it was rather flat. Whoever he was speaking to noticed, because there was a deep groan. "I know, I'm fine â€¦ only, I think I've decided, bud. It just isn't right, for me to do this to Berk, and to dad. And to you, too."

Astrid frowned. _Who was he speaking to? And what did he mean? She readied her axe, blood rising with excitement â€" he had to be speaking to the one responsible for his improvement in the ring. No one got that good that quickly, especially not _him_. No matter what her dad said, Hiccup had a secret, and Haddock or not a challenge was a challenge. She would not be the first Hofferson to be crushed.

Before she could leap out, there was another groan that froze her in place as she tried to ascertain the location of her unsuspecting prey without visual cues. Hiccup's companion hadn't said a word, and the noises of rustling, dragging and leather seemed to indicate that things were being moved around. Just as she was about to leap out, axe at the ready, Hiccup gave a shaky sigh.

"I guess â€¦ this is goodbye, then. It's for the best. It is." He sounded like he was trying to convince himself. He also sounded vaguely tearful.

Astrid wouldn't let him bury his secret before she discovered it. She had to find out what his secret was and who he was speaking to, now!

Just as she leapt over the boulder she'd been hiding behind a gust of strong wind and something soft but solid hit her upside her forehead, sending her ass-over-teakettle until she was dizzily looking up at the stars framed by the cove. Groaning, as there was no point in stealth now, she sat up, expecting to find a cold-eyed Hiccup and whoever his companion was glaring down at her. Instead, she found nothing but an empty glade and quiet lake, rustled only by the late-summer breeze. Damn him, he'd escaped her again!

She hissed and cursed, calling out to him to come out, but he never did. She realised too late that she should have listened for signs of his or his companion's retreat, but when she climbed out of the cove, there was no frush of undergrowth big enough for a human. Promising herself a confrontation, first thing tomorrow before their final lesson, Astrid conceded this round to Hiccup and headed home.

The moment she approached her bed, she caught sight of the parchment and her heart leapt â€" of course, she had forgotten about it completely in the heat of the chase. Ripping it open, she sat on her bed to read curiously, and got more horrified the further down she went.

_Astrid, _

Please forgive my forwardness for coming into your room without permission; it is an occurrence that will not happen again. I only wanted to say thank you, and to apologise.

You were right, all those weeks ago, when you told me that I was nothing but an embarrassment to my tribe, my clan and my dad. I hadn't wanted to see it, because of course, who would want to? But that I did not see it only shows how right you were, and how much of a burden my selfishness has been to Berk. I have done my best to be of good Berk stock, but it seems it is not my purpose, and so it is time to move on.

I would like to thank you for having the grace to tell me what I didn't want to hear; I appreciate your honesty. No one else seemed to think me worth wasting time on, but your directness and clear thinking have always been something I admired. It has helped me make the right choice.

I have asked my father to nominate you as his next heir â€" out of us, there is no one more capable, of that I'm sure, and my father will see it. You will make your father and mine proud; it has always been in you, and I've always admired you for it. I am in no position to ask for favours, however, I will still ask for one; please take care of my father, and make him proud, where I can never.

Your axe needs maintenance only about once a month â€" ask Gobber to fix the third axels most of all. He will understand.

The lower caves and the sheer rock beach are strategic hazards, as are the lack of ramparts at the back of the island facing due east of Raven point. Remind my dad of them, sometime. I have, but he will listen to you better, for good reason.

I wish you well â€" lead Berk prosperously, Astrid. Ignore Snotlout when you can, and put him and the twins in the places where you want things to break and get bruised; they're a force to be reckoned with. And listen to Fishlegs when you have patience for it â€" he will see strengths and weaknesses faster than any.

May you all be safe, and luckier now that I can no longer leave messes to clean and resources to waste. Be well.

Hiccup

Astrid stared at the neat rows of black runes on the parchment with an open mouth, unable initially to comprehend. A vague voice at the back of her mind garbled various thoughts â€" silly boy, what was he doing, running away like a child. And ah â€" so his goodbye in that cove wasn't to his companion, but to Berk. And wasn't it a lovely thing, that he would no longer wreak almost more havoc than the dragons?

The last thought seemed to slice through her haze of disbelief, and caused a sharp pain to pool in her stomach, a mixture of horror and guilt and terror. She'd been harsh, competitive, relentless; she hadn't meant to drive him away. She'd only meant to rise to the challenge, to be better, to strive to win and persevere as she always had. The echo of her cruel words rang in her ears as she re-read the part where he _thanked_ her for it. The hints to help, the gaps in their defences, even the tone in which he spoke of his departure all

sounded as if even though he knew they didn't want him â€" so much that he was leaving â€" he was still so desperate to help.

A part of her angered at how pathetic it sounded, how weak and feeble it was to run away simply because fitting in was a problem. But a larger part was drowning in the guilt of having driven a boy away from his home and convinced him his father was ashamed of him, while she suddenly remembered his last words in the cove, his tone and its new meaning in this light. She was responsible for having run off the only son of the chief.

She ran a frightened hand through her hair and almost cried out when her fingers came across something cold and foreign trapped between a snag in her hair and her kransen. Wiggling her fingers, she felt that there, under the leather, was something round and flat, and after some careful and delicate handling, she managed to take it out. Lighting a candle, she held it up to the light.

It was the strangest thing she'd ever seen, flat, black as the night and letting only very little light through with a very dark blue hue of midnight. The edges were smooth and thick, round like a coin but tapered off on one side. It seemed to be a precious stone, the most beautiful she had ever seen, as turning it in the light revealed different hues of dark blue in mottled patterns, like pipe smoke rising up against the night sky.

Astrid's fist closed around it as she bit her lip; this stone was lodged in her hair when she was hit â€" probably by Hiccup's companion â€" as they escaped. He had to be rich, and strong to have knocked her over, and dropped this stone from his clothing, scabbard or leathers. Whoever he was, Astrid was not going to surrender it back: this was hers now, a reminder of her stupidity, and her unnecessary cruelty.

A shaft of light penetrating her wooden window shutters alerted her that it was morning; new panic overcame her â€" she shouldn't have been sitting here and commiserating herself, she should have been out there, preventing Hiccup's foolish escape with someone who was obviously foreign to Berk, headed the gods knew where to do the gods knew what, with terrible scenarios of slave markets and indecent things running through her mind.

Rushing outside, she was not expecting to find Berk in an uproar. When she stopped long enough to realise that everyone knew, however, she realised that Stoick was already on the hunt. A part of her felt relieved â€" with Berk on his steps already he wouldn't get far with so slim an advantage. Another part of her was sick with fear that her role in his disappearance would be discovered â€" but then, she would deserve it. Steeling herself, she went to look for her father, because if she was going to shame the clan, he had a right to know. He and her had always worked well together to solve problems after all, and she was willing to admit â€" if only to herself at least â€" that she was truly, for the first time in a long time â€" scared and confused. She really just wanted her father. The same way Hiccup had only ever just wanted his.

With that sickening thought, she launched herself out the door.

****That is the first prologue, which I hope you enjoyed. There will be two other such prologues, that I will post on alternate days, and then I will take a once-a-week schedule for posting. The story is actually written and complete, which is how I like working (I will finish a story, usually, before posting it) so there should not be any delays unless life or hardware problems decide to get petty with me.****

****Cultural information:****

****An Eddur is plural for Edda, and it is either a prose or a poetry piece, and that was one of the literature types used in the Viking age. Most of the words being used in Becoming in reference to Viking culture will be in Icelandic, as that is where most of what we consider to be Norse mythology nowadays originates - not all, mind you, just most. The title of this story itself is in Icelandic, as the _**Ã¼**_ clearly indicates, as it is part of the Icelandic alphabet. I will be explaining the meaning of the title at the end of the story. Anyone who does know, please no spoilers! ;)****

****I am also from a different side of the pond, and will be writing in my native British English. Hope that doesn't disturb your reading experience. Thank you again to Foxy for being my own personal Berta - er, beta. No one safeguards me so thoroughly while my spell-check is out pillaging.**
>

2. Prologue 2 - Past

****Welcome again, all those who have returned for the second prologue. I would like to point out a few things, which will be in the end note. I would appreciate if you could read it for your own increased reading experience.****

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1_

**Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir**

* * *

><p>Past

_Dad, _

_I want to start by saying; I am sorry. I know I've said it so many times now that it's almost lost its meaning, but this time, I really _**do**_ mean it, especially because I hope it will be the last time I say it, and cause you disappointment._

Disappointment. I sure brought you lots of that; sorry, dad. I didn't even realise how much until now. When we spoke in my workshop at the forge, it's when I realised how hard it must have been, to be my dad. I'm sorry.

_So I have decided that I can't stay. I may have been doing â€ better, recently, but it's probably only a phase, another short part,

before I start disappointing you again, and I don't want that. I don't want to make you sad and angry, dad. You deserve better. I look down at myself, and I realise now that I never have really been the son you deserve. I'm sorry I couldn't be that, dad, I really am._

With me gone, I hope your problems will lessen. You can pick a proper heir â€" as little as my thoughts probably weigh, if you want them anyway, I would go with Astrid Hofferson. She's the most balanced from the younger generations, can think fast, is a good warrior and a good leader â€" and you won't have to worry about me getting outside during raids to cost the village, either.

I will think of you â€" I hope that you will find a few fond memories of me to dwell on, among the messes. I will not bring shame to the Haddock name; I know you wouldn't want me to use it outside of Berk, being me and all, so I'm leaving it here with you.

Goodbye, dad. I'm sorry I couldn't be anything you wanted me to be; your burden will be lighter now and I'm glad I can at least do this for you and for Berk.

Hiccup.

Stoick stared at the parchment without really seeing it, the words not really sinking into his brain. When he'd come home to find the fire out cold and the house quiet, he'd thought it odd but not overly so â€" his son had always been up at all hours. But when they'd spoken at the forge earlier, he'd seemed tired. So Stoick'd gone up to the tiny room his son used to see whether he'd fallen asleep at his desk â€" another frequent occurrence â€" and had found the room pristine: and empty. There was not a shred of Hiccup left in it; the bed was stripped, the cupboards bare, the usual clutter completely vanished. It was as if his son, his Hiccup, had never really been there at all.

Stoick blinked and realised he had squashed the parchment in his meaty clenched fist, and yelped in panic, straightening it and smudging some of the charcoal words written in his son's precise rune hand. Seeing the runes' charcoal spread seemed to wake his mind up; no, this couldn't happen. His son couldn't be gone, just like that. He couldn't.

The chief got off his son's bed where he'd found the note, rushed through the house calling his son's name, and then exited into the square, loping down the hillock leading to his house like a rampaging dragon. There were only a few people left outside; winter was coming, and once the sparse sun had collapsed into the sea, it was folly to remain outdoors for long. However, once they found out what had happened to their new hero, more and more people began donning coats and lighting the torches, ready to comb the island.

In the end, the sun peeked on an island that had had no sleep but still come up empty handed. One of the tiny boats was reported missing; it could be manned by a single person, and could go some ways away, but not far. Ships were called, men were poured into them. The seas around Berk were searched, but young Hiccup the Promising hadn't been found.

Gobber was not smiling any longer. Stoick was inconsolable. The

village found out soon enough why his son had gone, the first time he'd been called a coward for running. Mildew had lost all his front teeth, but Stoick's bellowing voice had made sure almost everyone heard; his son hadn't left out of fear, but duty. Hiccup had misunderstood, Stoick had said something that made him think he was undesired, a burden to the tribe, and unloved by his father. So Hiccup was out there, proving himself. He would only come back once he was a hero. Stoick never said what the letter seemed to imply so definitely. No one but Gobber ever saw it.

Many of the villagers had muttered where they thought he couldn't hear, musing on the irony. The child had truly been a burden in the eyes of many; most saw the potential in his intelligence, and he was a young lad, after all, good in the forge despite his tiny arms. He'd grow into his strength, given time, and out of his hare-brained ways of youth. And yet, now that he had just begun to finally grow into it, Stoick had to go and chase him off. Typical. Still, most great Vikings took a voyage – Hiccup would be no different. After all, his great grandfather hadn't made his fortune and riches (which were still unfound, thanks to that blasted poetry map) by staying on Berk's shore.

Life went on, and no news of the boy reached Berk. Stoick wore his armour strongly and trudged on. It wasn't a surprise to the blacksmith when Stoick spoke to Gobber about tacitly nominating Astrid as his new heir. It was a surprise when she refused. And then it wasn't; Stoick had desired to adopt her, in order for the Haddock line to continue, but the Hoffersons probably hadn't liked that too much. Astrid was their only girl-child, accomplished and brave, strong and capable. The village would probably like the prospect of her as heir, though not like that it implied Hiccup would not be back, Gobber said, but most would understand the Hofferson clan's reluctance to lose such a member, even if for a noble cause. In the end, Astrid only proved his son right once again when she came up with the best solution. She presented him with her shield, asking him to keep it safe.

On normal circumstances it would have meant she planned to remain unmarried, to be a shield maiden for Berk and allow Stoick to call upon her as a warrior at any time Berk needed. Now, instead, it meant an alliance, and joining their two clans. He'd thought it was her father's idea at first, until Stoick had seen his gobsmacked face; after all, the plan was cunning incarnate.

Astrid Hofferson was to all effects now engaged to his son, and her shield was in his custody as Hiccup's father, not as Stoick the Vast, Chief of Berk. She could be his heir, if his worse fears proved real and the letter gave truth to what it hinted, but her family would not lose her worth in bride-price. She had been adamant, of course; when Hiccup returned, if he did with a wife, things could be re-evaluated. However, Stoick was an old hand at this game, and had seen the pride shining in Hacknee Hofferson's eyes. His daughter had truly come up with the best political solution. Even still, he often saw her, sitting by the cliffs near Raven Point, looking out at sea, and it made him wonder.

Stoick realised that Gobber resented him a great deal, though he kept it in check. The feelings degenerated until a full-on fist fight, the likes of which they hadn't had since he'd lost both his small toes in the blizzard looking for that damned treasure, left them both

bruised. Their relationship had mellowed again after, but Gobber's sudden bouts of sullen melancholy were telling.

With a sigh, Stoick forced his heavy hand to push the door to the Haddock household open. Every single generation of Haddock chiefs had come and gone until the threshold had been worn a thousand times, and yet now, that seemed to have come to an end with him. The empty house greeted him with its darkness and cold, and he forced his body into it, stopping himself from wishing that his Hiccup would come down to greet him with a mug of ale and one or two blocks of ice, a hopeful smile and a smart mouth.

He didn't, of course. The house remained black and silent, even as Stoick sat in his chair and looked around it. Outside, the village slept, and his home had never seemed so dead. He'd been an only surviving child himself, but Stoick never remembered this ancestral lodge to be so empty; his parents and grandparents had always filled it when he had been growing up, and despite the fact that Stoick had lost all his siblings to dragons or disease or the sea, it had never occurred to him that he would be the last. His grandparents had gone the way of the old, his parents had followed, early in Hiccup's childhood. After Val had been taken by the blasted monsters, his brother-in-law Spitelout and Gobber had often been in to fill the gaps. And of course, there had always been his sweet, smart Hiccup.

And yet somehow, Stoick had managed to let it all slip through his fingers, like dry sand on the beach. He wondered whether Hamish Haddock II had felt this, as Stoick's own father, the heir's brother, had taken his place; but then he remembered that Hamish and Stoick's father had been close, that Stoick's father was of direct Haddock line also, and that of course, Hamish had only gone on the quest to secure their father's fortune; he hadn't meant not to come back.

Hiccup meant that. He really did. For the first time in the whirlwind months that had passed since he first read the neatly folded, neatly written note, Stoick the Vast allowed himself to see the truth, and cry bitterly. His son, his last, most beloved family, was gone. Hiccup had left thinking that he was worth nothing to his father but disappointment and sadness.

Tomorrow, Stoick the Vast would wake up, put his helmet on, and go out into the village to be its chief, its judge, its arms and its legs and its head. Tonight, he allowed himself to be a father and a man; a father, who had unwittingly driven away his son in scorn, and a man, who had found himself completely alone by his ignorant design.

=0=

****There are a few things I would like to say about this story, and about my writing style in general.****

****1- I write in a particular way where a select character is the narrator for the duration of an entire scene. Different scenes will have different narrators, but the same scene will not jump from one point of view to the next. This will become more evident in the chapters rather than the prologues.****

no matter where he'd fallen asleep. How Stoick tended to need his sword sharpened more often than was strictly healthy for the metal. It was annoying sometimes, and others it was demeaning and even humiliating, because Stoick made no secret of the fact that he thought his son incapable of protecting himself with the spidery arms and legs, but it was also part of Hiccup's daily routine. Wake up, wash self; know father loves you.

It was how he faced the village every day, never mind the general popular opinion on the village screw up. And even when he got discouraged, and when his father's disappointed scowl got so bad he had to whinge about it with Gobber, he strove to do better, to get over it quickly, to stop being 'all this', because he had something to get back to, something important, and that was to make his dad proud. As long as his dad loved him, it didn't matter that he couldn't get a word in edgewise " when they spoke at all " that he got reamed regularly and that his peers and villagers thought little good of him. He had a goal, he would strive to achieve it, and he would prove himself to be worthy of his father's love and name, or die trying. Because damnit, he loved his dad and his village just as much; he just needed to show them he was worthwhile, and since he hadn't managed it yet, there was no blaming them for getting ticked off. Which was why he wouldn't stop till he managed. He was a Viking, after all. He had " stubbornness issues.

His house of cards received its first blow to its foundations the first time they let the Nadder out. Some strong winds had already been rocking the structure, with his time divided as it was between his original goal of gaining his father's respect and deserving his love, and the growing feeling of curiosity he was experiencing with his new fascination. The dragon was enticing him so much, making him rethink the world as he had known it to be since he was old enough to remember words. He had begun thinking dangerous things.

Hiccup's perspective had already started to wobble and shift, warped like a hunk of metal in the smithy that was being pounded relentlessly so that it didn't look like its original shape anymore, but it didn't look like any finished product either. Then Astrid had opened her mouth, and the ground rocked beneath his feet.

After storming out of the arena, stomping aimlessly through the village while ignoring and being ignored by everyone, a number of sharp, pointy thoughts kept prodding at his mind. The disappointed scowls and the silent meals and the very public reprimands took a different light, or tried to, because the only thought made him want to be ill. So he shoved the thought aside, forwent his cold empty house and went to the smithy. A few productive hours were spent there, before a shield and a fish were selected and taken to the cove where, unknown to him, his future lay waiting.

After that, his thoughts of dangerous things only increased. He began to think things like " their knowledge was wrong, their behaviour too. Things like, perhaps, love could be earned differently, or that there was another, different solution, a third option in the endless war to survive waged with the reptiles. All things that required change " and change was not something Vikings appreciated overly much, especially not with those stubbornness issues that tended to run in the blood. As his love grew for the playful, incredible dragon, and his relationship with Berk grew more and more distant due to his guilt at hoodwinking everyone so thoroughly, Hiccup's heart

began to be more and more divided, polarised between his natural desire to be loved which Toothless was satisfying in oodles, and his natural belief that he needed to earn that love – the love his dad had for him, which still kept him cemented to Berk at the roots.

Then his dad came back, and for the first time in such a long time – perhaps ever? Hiccup was sure there had been a time, before his mum was gone – Stoick looked down on his son, bursting at the seams with pride, and Hiccup really felt ill. He had worked so hard to earn that expression and make his dad laugh like that that he'd leapt on the hope that his dad, at least, had seen through his ruse, because he was his dad after all. That he really knew about Toothless, and would support him on this.

It was stupid, really. The axe fell with a mighty blow not a few sand grains later, leaving Hiccup's house of cards to flutter to the bottom of his belly, and keep going down to his feet.

All those years of the worst Viking Berk has ever seen! Odin, it was rough! I almost gave up on you!

Hiccup couldn't quite recall a time when he'd hurt so much. Even after his first few tumbles off the dragon-in-flight, his bruises and contusions seemed less painful now. Astrid's words, and many others', seemed to rise through the water of his mind like oil to taunt him – he truly had been only a disappointment. It really wasn't what he looked like, but all of him that his dad couldn't stand. It was sharp and all-consuming and terrifying. It was also so very sad, he realised in a corner of his mind that wasn't busy making his face neutral, because he really did love his dad very much. And Berk. But it was stupid now not to accept that the feeling wasn't mutual – clearly had never been.

Once his father had left, Hiccup looked at the tiny room he was in blankly, not sure what to feel for a few moments. His sketch book stared back at him, pictures of Toothless so blatantly obvious the expression he had drawn on the dragon with his own hand seemed to mock him; his dad only saw in Hiccup what he wanted to see. Even if it was staring back at him, right there not three feet away in the form of tail-fin plans and night fury sketches in various poses, Stoick would never really see Hiccup – never had. Stoick wasn't holding out for Hiccup to prove himself; in fact, Stoick had all but given up on his son becoming anything but the worst Viking Berk had ever had. The silent understanding Hiccup thought they'd had, where he worked harder and harder and finally managed to prove himself, while his dad kept loving him till he managed, had all been in his head. The disappointed scowls and the silent meals and the very public reprimands finally managed to take on the other, sickly light that Astrid had first shone on them; his dad hadn't been encouraging him in the only way he knew – with tough love that was lots of tough and little outward love. He'd just simply been fed up of the boy who kept screwing up and making his life miserable and his job even harder than it had to be.

For a few moments, he wept bitterly. It wasn't every day someone realised that they were so very unwanted, and it wasn't every day a boy found out the dad he adored didn't really love him. But he didn't let himself do that for long – it had been a point of pride that he hadn't cried since his mother had gone, and at least in that, he was

a Viking. So he dried his tears, took a deep, shaky breath, and started thinking.

He wrote three letters. One he left for Gobber in the smithy. The other two would be delivered to the proper addressees personally. He cleared out everything from his tiny workshop which he could carry, and hid in places he knew only he could reach the things that he could not. Knowing that he had little time, as his father was busy but also tired, he headed first to the docks to release a boat he knew was always there as a diversion, then quickly home, combing through the room in the house loft he had slept in since he'd left the cradle, and removing every trace of himself he could find. Most of the things he could carry, and the rest was piled neatly in a corner, to be disposed of. One of the letters was placed on the bed's wooden frame.

For a moment, he was seized by the temptation to go to the arena and free the dragons, especially the nightmare, before the winter forced the Vikings to do what they did every year, but he threw it off, the regret welling with the other feelings in his chest as he hurried on. The danger of being discovered was too large, and then Toothless would never make it on his own. After delivering the other letter, Hiccup simply steeled himself, shifted his wicker luggage and small bag of supplies on his shoulders and headed towards the cove. His dragon friend was both amused and confused to see him at the wrong time of day; and then alert to his mood, because he began nudging him comfortingly as he whispered some of his thoughts to him. Toothless had proved he could understand him perfectly more than once, and his comforting groans, at that moment, where what began to keep Hiccup going.

Because it was for the best. Berk didn't care for him "no blame to them, he did mess up pretty bad often enough. And his dad " deserved so much better than a burden for a son instead of the valid aid and support he should have had. Hiccup had thought he was supporting him; that if he kept trying, and in the end proved himself, he would earn the right to take his place by his dad's side. A small seductive voice still whispered in his ear, telling him to forget all this, to go back to the village and take his chance in the arena " his dad had spoken so proudly of him after all! It had almost seemed like he'd made it at last " but that illusion had been shattered, now. Hiccup knew that Stoick's pride was misplaced, and that their perspective if their relationship was different.

So Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the third nodded resolutely and urged Toothless upwards, because there was still one thing he could do right by his dad and his beloved home " he could remove from Berk the worst Viking it had ever seen. If he held on to Toothless' harness so hard it bruised his hand, and if he wept all the way to the next tiny, deserted island, it was of no consequence. Something new would keep him going now " Toothless seemed to be offering himself up for the job " and there was always his new knowledge on dragons to work on. Perhaps if he changed enough people's minds, the raids could be fought differently. Better. With less victims and injuries, on both sides.

When the following day dawned, the gods' plans had already been set in motion, or so the people decided once they looked back. But so it had to be, because after all, Asgard took care of its heroes, and Hiccup Haddock certainly was one.

=0=

****This story was born because of this scene. I have always been impressed by the resilience given to Hiccup's character in this film, and after re-watching it countless times, I always wondered what kept him going. The scene at the docks seemed to indicate quite clearly that it was his dad's love and regard, and then on one re-watch, I noticed that for a split second as Stoick utters that line, Hiccup's face looks completely heartbroken. The idea was born that if the line had come after Hiccup's fate was shaken more than the film, a break would occur where the narrative would split off in a different direction.****

****I hope you have all enjoyed the last prologue. A number of sharp readers pointed a few things to me that were partially answered here. I am always very excited when my readers catch the small clues and hints I leave, so feel free to go to town with speculation. I find that it increased my reading pleasure, when I'm devouring a novel, when I could read on one level for the plot, and on another for linguistic hints or references embedded in the text that I can recognise on a first or second read, so I strive to write in that way with the humbler tools given to me.****

****Updates will occur every Friday from next chapter onwards: The next update will take place on Friday 31st January '14.****

4. Daily Toil

****The first proper chapter of this **_**Edda**_** starts here. Welcome to the start of Hiccup's road towards becoming a complete, mature man.****

****An apology for the slightly late upload (it is 1.08am here), but my service provider decided to dislike me today.****

****A slight warning of animal cruelty in the first scene.****

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1</p>

Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir****

* * *

><p>Daily Toil</p>

The chores in the house were done. They never took too long, not with two frugal warriors living inside. Stoick never commented about anything, either " not since she'd moved in, and taken on the household role she had never thought would fit her. Still, Astrid simply sighed as she covered the bubbling pot, banking the fire till it only smouldered, and shouldered her axe; her new life hadn't erased much of her previous one, and none of the guilt that still gnawed at her even after five years.

She headed out, stopping for a moment at the Haddock lodge's door to look at the rest of the village. It was little wonder why the chief's

house was built in this spot, once you saw the view it afforded. Almost all of Berk save Mildew's part of the island was in view, and even if the sun had only barely peeked above the sea, some of its more bustling residents were already raising a hand to her in greeting.

Stoick would be up soon, would help himself to breakfast and then head out to the Hall to take stock of his duties for the day. Astrid knew to head there once she had managed to satisfy her own need to keep her physical training in top shape, and between shadowing Stoick and helping out where she could with her peers in the normal chores reserved for their group, as well as keeping the Haddock lodge in proper order, she knew her day would be full until her head hit her pillow tonight.

This moment, though, was only hers, and so with a few nods and waves, she headed out towards the forge. Once there, Gobber greeted her with his quiet smile "no one had heard him sing for the last five years" and handed her what she always came for; a few scraps of leather, good for nothing but making a few thongs to hang things by, when there was enough to them. The smith turned back to his work. Gobber was always busy now, after all, because he had never taken on another apprentice.

She hurried off quietly, hastening her pace as she noticed the sun's steady climb into the sky. She nodded to Fishlegs, who was out looking blearedly at a hole in his roof, his wife grumbling at him from within as Tuffnut tried, and failed, to taunt his sister through the hole without falling in. Astrid went even faster when she heard Snotlout's laugh "wasting time shaking that boy off was not in her plans. Everyone else knew to leave her be in the mornings, except him.

She rushed through the woods, using the time to practice evasive manoeuvres and to travel while throwing her axe at targets she pretended to be in motion. Once she got to her destination, however, she approached the spot at the cliffs quietly. The mound of rocks she had piled there greeted her as it did every day, shining with the light behind it, and keeping strong against the winds. It had been blown down a few times, but Astrid only started building it back up again.

Selecting another rock she deemed heavy and sturdy enough, Astrid began weaving one of the longest leather thongs Gobber had just given her into the web of the ones already there, holding the rock structure together. Once she was satisfied, she put the newer rock in the cradle of woven leather strips and began knotting them together, securing the new addition. Finally, before putting the last knot in, she took out a wooden charm she had whittled, and added it to the structure. Many others like it, all representing Mj llnir, clicked against the rocks as the wind jostled them. Astrid sat there after she was ready, praying hard to Odin and Thor to keep that stupid, stupid boy safe. Absently, she clutched her amulet as she prayed.

She had worked at the docks for months on end in order to earn enough goods she could barter for the silver. Her father had been confused, and even slightly angry that she had not turned to him to ask for money, and that she was not sharing her earnings with the household. But he had seen the letter, and he had grudgingly understood that

this was her form of atonement. He had, after all, conceded to her moving into Stoick's home soon, and her bride-price had been fixed to something that would make the Hofferson clan richer for it. Hacknee also understood that his daughter hadn't proposed the solution that she had entirely for the political advantages it brought all parties; he could see in his little girl's eyes " for little girl she would always remain to him, despite some calling her an old maid by this point " that she really hoped the Haddock boy would return, if only to expiate her guilt. Astrid knew her father could read her well, and had allowed her more freedom than was normal, and she was grateful for it.

Astrid took a deep breath of sea-breeze, looking out at the sun glinting over the water and fingering her amulet. Spidery silver webbing housed the strange jewel she had found in her hair, a constant reminder of that night. Gobber had made it for her willingly, but hadn't been kind enough to conceal from her that the design wasn't his own " it had been something his apprentice had done, and whose things had been taken from the hiding places Gobber knew well enough and strewn back in their place in the tiny back room. The large man was known to spend hours there after a day's work, perusing some of the things his boy had created and hidden away as if ashamed of himself for his talent.

Life on Berk hadn't changed much for many, really, in the past five years. Astrid stood, giving the mound one last look before she began walking back to Berk. Apart from the obvious changes " Stoick rarely ever smiled at all anymore; Gobber's whistling and singing were a memory the youngest children didn't have; Astrid had moved into the Haddock lodge and officially been engaged to the chief's absent son " nothing much had changed. Ruffnut and Fishlegs had married last fall, almost a year ago now during the Autumn harvest, and Astrid had let herself enjoy it by staying close to the chief, her engagement protecting her from most of the unwanted calls to dance. They now had a child on the way, which was due any day, and Astrid enjoyed taunting the female twin with her inability to walk without waddling.

She was half-way back to the village when the first boom alerted her that something was happening " and that 'something' was what it always was, another dragon raid. Legs pumping, she was there in the midst of the fray within moments, axe swinging, punches flying and legs kicking. She reached Stoick just as he was wrestling a nightmare by the horns and saved him a flaming whip-tail by tackling him away. The dragon got away, but Stoick was saved a few very painful new scars.

The raid was repelled with their usual success rate. They won some and they lost some, and in this case, they'd lost some cattle, but no one had been hurt, and Snotlout strutted through town with two handfuls of terrible terrors he had captured and muzzled. As punishment and example, the terrors were tied to a post and left there, just facing the ocean, but chained to the wood and unable to leave, eat or rest as the children of Berk took turns poking them.

Astrid looked at the new additions to the wooden post grimly. One of them had lain down, and was barely fighting anymore. The village was busy bustling with the new set of repairs it now required, people yelling and cursing for this hammer and that rope. She knew she

should be headed towards the hall as all hands would be needed to have the houses in good shape before any rain set in later today â€" because it would set in soon enough this time of year. But she couldn't look away from the prone terror â€" it would die, soon, she knew it. They always did, after they stopped fighting to get away.

She fingered her amulet, and Hiccup's taciturn, kind face shot through her mind. She hadn't realised how much she'd really noticed him till his quiet presence, always thrumming in the background like the comforting hum of a beehive, was suddenly gone. He'd been different, and she'd thought him weak for it, but the letters he had left her and Stoick, the brief glance she'd been given into his mettle through steely eyes, and the hard choices he'd made for the good of people who he thought openly cared nothing for him, had enshrined him in her mind into something that now she almost strived to be. Anyone could swing an axe, grow muscular and punch people in the face. It took something else to do what Hiccup had done, and she admired him for it.

With that in mind, she steeled herself and walked towards the terror posts. The gaggle of tiny dragons retreated as far as their chains would go, growling in their tinny voices behind their muzzles. The one lying down tried to rise, but wobbled back with a flop, and Astrid looked around, then bit her lip and cursed at herself before kneeling; stupid boy, even when he wasn't there, he was making them clean up his mess. She unhooked the chain from the back of its muzzle and hissed at it when it began scratching frantically, fear apparently giving it some strength back. A good shake quickly sapped it of fight, however, and she huffed at it, feeling stupid but cradling it against her nonetheless. Quickly, trying to look busy, she walked fast across the village to the Haddock home, depositing the trembling dragon on the table and quickly taking out three smoked fishes from the pantry. Taking the dragon up again, she headed towards the forest through the back door, waiting until she was a ways away before dropping it more gently than she was wont on the grass.

She put the fish down and gave it a look. "If you try to bite, or burn me, I'm finishing off what the pole started," she hissed at it. It hissed back, but only half-heartedly somehow, giving the fish very ravenous looks. "Right."

She took the muzzle off, and the dragon threw itself at the fish. Astrid stood there, for reasons she wasn't even sure why, and stared at it when it looked back at her, once the meagre meal was gone. The tiny dragon was still shaking, claws curling in and out of the ground as it vibrated with uncertainty. She sighed at it, just as unsure herself.

"Go on then, shoo. Stay away from Berk and you'll be fine. Don't make me regret this, or I'll turn you into a rug."

It gave a small puff of fire, hardly enough to scorch the ground in front of it, but it still caused Astrid to reach instinctively for her axe and wonder for a split-second what on earth she had been thinking. Obviously, though, the dragon had been trying for a diversion, because it flapped helplessly until it was a few feet in the air, gave a few shrilling cries, and then collapsed back onto the grass, having seemingly exhausted all its energy. Astrid couldn't

hold back a snicker as it seemed to glare at her, and she threw it a piece of yak jerky she kept on her person for emergencies before heading back towards the village.

"Stupid reptile. Stay out of the village, you hear?"

She trudged back to Berk, shaking her head at herself and at the stupid little thing. She refused to acknowledge why she had just set free one of the village pests â€" it wasn't because Hiccup's compassion and kindness was something she had come to want dearly, and it wasn't because the red-scaled terror had very familiarly coloured green eyes. It wasn't even because she felt sorry for it, and all the senseless death that kept happening on both sides in the race for survival.

A thought kept recurring to her, though. The tiny reptile, even battered and half-dead as it was, had tried to fly off, and if her hunter's bearings weren't completely off, which they weren't, it was squarely in the direction of Helheim's gate. Even in the condition it was, with little to no energy left in it, the dragon had tried to fly back home.

An idea began forming in Astrid's head, half shaped like a monster and half like a final stroke of genius. The bustle of the village and the chores to do engulfed her once she reached the main streets of Berk, and the daily routine and so much work to do swept her away with it, until she was back in the loft room, exhausted, creeping under the furs in a bed that had once been Hiccup's. The idea came back to her then, slightly more shapely than before after a day of stewing in the juices of the back of her mind, and she dreamt of terrors tied to ship masts, pulling them to their triumph or doom.

=0=

Stoick woke up every morning ready to take on the world or die trying. Or that was what he used to wake up like, when his house was less silent and his life less empty. Now he woke to the good smell of food, a full day, a waiting village and a large bone still to pick with their reptile visitors. It would have been enough to fill anyone's life up to the brim, but Stoick's life still had a large, Hiccup-shaped hole in it that wouldn't be filled no matter what he did.

When Astrid had moved in, the lodge had at least stopped casting the appearance of a funeral ship, swallowing him whole in its blankness. She did everything that was expected of her to the best of her abilities, cooked well, kept the house spotless in a way Hiccup simply couldn't have by virtue of being out all day as much as his father was. He had all but adopted her, and the people of Berk were still fresh with the image of Hiccup the Promising, who was out on a quest to prove himself a hero, that they did not question the strange arrangement. After all, marriages had little to do with the groom's will anyway.

Still, Stoick couldn't quite shake off the veil of quiet that had descended on his life, as if someone had draped an invisible blanket of bear fur over all the noise. There were still the activities, the shouts and calls and explosions of every day Berk with its people and its pests, but somehow, the world was quieter.

Perhaps it was melancholy, he thought one night as he watched Astrid care for her weapons with oily rags and whetstones. This, right here, the domesticity of two warriors talking of their day's conquests and shortcomings, was what he had always wished to share with Hiccup. It seemed like such a ridiculous idea now, because Stoick could sit and sharpen weapons with anyone on Berk, but only Hiccup could strew blue-prints of the oddest contraptions all over the place, sketch everything he could lay his eyes on and make life so unpredictable and interesting. His son had been a man of unique talent, and that uniqueness had led Stoick to his wit's end when Hiccup was there. And yet now, five years of a quiet house and sameness had made him wish for his son's crazy ideas, his enthusiasm and his disastrous attempts to help. Stoick wished more than ever that the smithy would blow up with more than a dragon attack; that he would find half-eaten fruit and nibbled bread on the table around a parchment filled with scribbles, and that he could still walk up the stairs and see an auburn head lying on the pillow instead of a blonde one. It was almost a lesson to him from the gods, that the things he'd hated most about his son were also the ones he missed most dearly.

Astrid held her axe up to the light, turning it around to catch the glint of the flames before she sighed in satisfaction and put it back on its hooks. She had not used that axe in two years despite keeping it in pristine conditions, and Stoick had never asked why. Once her sharpening gear was put away, her whittling implements found their place in her lap, and another piece of oak turned into a small figure of Mjǫllnir.

"How did the Hoddegarr's son's presentation come along this morning?" Astrid asked half way through her task. She peeked up at him, glancing at the fire on the way back down as a pot bubbled merrily over it, boiling their linens.

"Oh, beautifully. Almost broke into a free-for-all fight. You should have seen grand-pappa Svensen, insisting the little wee thing be called Odegarr the fierce." He laughed, enjoying Astrid's titter.

"He has to earn his adult name, like everyone else," she said, humming a few stray chuckles as her knife made short work of the oak. Stoick looked at her fondly: she had certainly earned her name of Astrid the Loyal. "Besides, Odegarr Hoddegarr?" Another chuckle.

"How about you, full day?"

"Hmm," she agreed with a nod. "After the raid and patrol, I took care of Mulch's chicken problem. And â€¦ Stoick, I've been thinking." He looked up at her; her expression was sharp, and she was staring at the wooden surface of the table intently. "If you were captured, and found your way out, where would you return?"

Stoick looked at her for a moment, contemplating her expression, and the way her fingers were rolling the oak piece back and forth. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, if you'd been captured and you managed to get away, wouldn't you get home as fast as you can?"

"I would imagineâ€¦" He frowned. "Are you talking about â€¦ do you think Hic-

"I've been paying attention to the terrors," she quickly said, sitting up straighter, "and I noticed that for the first few days we tie them up, they all try to fly in the same direction with their chains yanked as far as they can go. I don't have any doubt that the direction they're flying in is towards the nest."

Sitting straighter himself, Stoick felt a streak of cold excitement snake down his back. All of Berk knew that Stoick was one of their best chiefs not only for his physical prowess, but also because of his keen mind. After all, even though Val had been no slouch, Hiccup had had more than enough wits to inherit from his father. The possibilities of what she was hinting at where â€

"I mean to say, what if instead of a post on the cliffs, they were tied to a ship mast?"

He swallowed. "They would lead us straight to the nest," he whispered. His fist came down on the table, making it wobble and making Astrid jump. "Why have I never thought of it! Ha!"

He rose quickly, reaching for his helmet, and was almost outside when he heard Astrid clear her throat. Stoick blinked, looking out the door he'd already flung open to be greeted by a hail storm that was ravaging the night. All of Berk was indoors, of course, and Stoick quickly closed the door as he was assaulted by large balls of ice. At the back of his mind, he registered that they'd covered the Autumn harvest just in time.

He sheepishly turned back to his near daughter-in-law, who was standing with her arms folded and an amused expression on her face.

"I think it can wait till morning, don't you?" she said with an entertained lilt in her voice and a raised brow. He smiled back, even though for only a moment, he saw another figure â€" shorter, skinnier, brown fur vest almost swallowing him as his overgrown hair got into his eyes.

"Sarcasm doesn't suit you, Astrid. But, of course. I won't be able to get anyone in the hall anyway at this hour."

She just smiled at him knowingly, and a larger part of him was almost ashamed of substituting her with a green-eyed, red-headed boy giving him the same expression of exasperated fondness; which he used to, in what felt like a lifetime ago. Before Stoick's patience for his son had somehow fallen short, and he had begun to lose sight of how much he actually loved him.

=0=

He dragged the heavy barrel across the dust floor, leaving a sizable groove. Righting it with a huff and a dull thump, he puffed a sigh and started putting the metal inside onto the hot ambers while operating the bellows with his left arm. Soon, it began to shine red and smoke, the corners becoming soft and rounded, and that was when he transferred it to the anvil with his tongs, taking a hammer to it with enthusiasm.

"How's it coming?"

Hiccup would have jumped if he hadn't noticed Toothless' head rise a few moments earlier. As it was, he smirked up at his visitor, who was evidently disappointed he hadn't cost the blacksmith at least a yelp.

"As far along as it can since you asked me a little while ago," Hiccup answered, still wearing his smirk. The older man huffed.

"Don't blame a guy for being impatient. I'm a Viking," he stated, as though that was the justification for everything. "And it's not every day a man gets an axe made by you," he went on with a smirk, causing Hiccup to laugh quietly. He couldn't help a small feeling of pride; his work had become prized across places he'd visited, and had won him respect and a selection of places to return to. The respect had also won him the right to ask for the favour of anonymity with the few who had realised who he was, which had been respected to date.

"It's only my second axe, actually, so I'm not experienced at this as the sword making. Which I told you before I started, and which you ignored," Hiccup pointed out. Thuggory nodded gamely and hopped into the shop to sit on a bench. Toothless opened an eye to look at him, and then dismissed him.

"Because having the second axe is almost as good as having the first! It's all about supremacy and coming in first â€" or almost first." Hiccup mumbled a backhand compliment about Thuggory's improved vocabulary, which earned Hiccup a chucked oil rag and a huff from Toothless. "Don't get fresh with me, willow tree! Who is it who got the first axe, anyway! It must have been some damn lucky bastard, to have your very first!"

"You have the gender all wrong," Hiccup replied, before biting his lip and turning towards his anvil again.

"Oooh, a lady friend!" Thuggory said with a wide leer. "This I have to hear! I've never seen you even look at the girls who come to bother you for trinkets and knives to sharpen, much less make an axe for one. That's practically a bride price!"

Hiccup's pounding got louder, and Toothless opened an eye to look at his friend. "I worked at the forge," he muttered testily.

"And was it a commission?" Thuggory teased. Hiccup's silence made him burst out laughing. "Ha, I knew you had it in you!"

"I was twelve!"

"At that age already, too!"

"You're impossible," Hiccup grumbled with a huff, turning his back to the older man stiffly.

"Ah, you still think of her, don't you? I'll bet she-

"She's back on Berk, probably married." Thuggory's mouth clamped shut quickly. Both of Toothless' eyes were open now, trained on his boy, and Hiccup's strikes were so powerful that the noise of metal on

metal was echoing incessantly through the room. "Now, are you done distracting me, Mr Heir of the Meathead Tribe? I thought you wanted the axes done by your wedding."

"I do, and you'd better have them done, seeing as they're your wedding gift!" Thuggory chuckled in relief. Hiccup's mood always soured when Berk was mentioned. "I don't exchange a sissy sword on my wedding day â€" it's axes or nothing! And with the lightweight material you use â€" when will you share the secret?" He looked at the taller man hopefully.

"And lose my trade?" Hiccup answered. "I think not! A man's got to eat."

"Like a bird," Thuggory huffed. "I'd swear you lived off berries, air and water if anyone asked."

Hiccup simply smirked and turned back to his work, folding the metal again and looking over towards his dragon.

"Give it a one, bud?" Obediently, Hiccup's dragon raised his head and gave a short burst of flame, aimed hard and fast towards the metal. When the light cleared, the metal glowed just the right amount, and Hiccup looked at it in satisfaction. When he'd left Berk, before he'd decided to venture south, then returned to find that he could ply his considerable talent as a smith on the neighbouring islands, he'd settled for the first winter in the deserted isle he'd initially landed on. He'd learned to hunt in the hard way â€" where the only other option was starvation â€" and had quickly set up a small forge, with the dragon substituting the coal, to keep the saddle and the fin properly outfitted. Through trial and error, he and Toothless had established the perfect smelting points of most metals they had come across â€" including the special one from his gronkle girl which was his own trade secret, and which had guaranteed him work â€" and thus food and privacy â€" in most of the clans.

"I'll never get how you do this," Thuggory said with a whistful sigh. "Seriously, I haven't been the cool one on the island since you started coming here on and off. No more 'Thuggory, pride of Freezing to Death'. All the kids want to be like 'Cattongue' now, never mind their future chief."

Hiccup snorted. "No they don't. I know for a fact that Kestrel was up on the hillock last week, yelling to all those who heard that he was Thuggory, King of the Wilderwest and the best dragon rider of them all."

"Yeah," Thuggory said sarcastically, "until all the other kids started throwing dragon dung at him for saying that."

"That," said Hiccup, turning just enough to give Thuggory a pointed smirk, "was for the dragon riding part. Everyone knows I'm the best in that."

"Oh look," Thuggory replied, "I think your head is swelling. Hit it against the ceiling, willow tree?"

Snorting, Hiccup turned back to his anvil, pounding at the metal, and letting Thuggory preen at getting the last word. The truth was, Hiccup wasn't used to being picked on because he was tall. Hiding a

smile, he gave a few more measured clangs, before his smile turning into something different entirely, satisfaction flushing up his spine as he plunged the thin metal rod into the bucket, quickly followed by the flat metal rings.

"What's those?" Thuggory asked curiously. "Making a gift for Heather too?"

"Those are the reason you asked me to make your axe, and not the old smith's apprentice. And I'm making Heather's axe too, or have you forgotten? They come in pairs," Hiccup jeered. "In fact, from now on, you will come in pairs." Hiccup mimicked a whipping motion, then ducked as Thuggory shot a bucket at him. Toothless blew it out of the smithy's open window with a single short blast, and then looked at Thuggory as if he were a child, causing Hiccup to laugh uproariously.

"Fine, fine, I get when I'm not wanted!" the clan heir said in mock offense. Toothless roared after him, clearly calling his bluff, and Hiccup only laughed more as he took the next part of the axe, already measured and ready to be smelted and cut. The axe head in its mould would be the last thing before assemblage and decoration, and Hiccup had already finished carving out the shape. He was reaching for the thongs when Thuggory showed up again, much to Toothless' frustration.

"You know, if I didn't know better, I'd think you either miss me, or really like it when Toothless chases you up and down the island."

"It's good exercise!" Toothless got to his feet, which caused Thuggory to chuckle uncomfortably, raising his arms in surrender, "buuut not right now. Look, I came to ask if you're going to be there. You know, when I getâ€¦" Thuggory repeated the whipping motion. Hiccup smirked.

"So you admit it!"

"Don't change the subject," Thuggory said astutely, and Hiccup frowned, having thought he'd get away with it.

"You know I can't, Thug," he groused, more bothered by the fact that he had to admit it. Hiccup had grown used to his tiny island, and even though he had gathered a fair amount of friendships during his travels, and visited many places and many of the islands in the archipelago, it was always a relief to return to the peace there compared with the hustle and bustle of the busy villages. Of course, that was in the summer; the first winter had nearly done him in and he had learned the lesson well, carefully choosing one village or another in the archipelago to spend the harsher months working his stay. That way, he made sure he never overstepped his host's hospitality, and managed to earn enough of a reputation as an independent soldier and smith to garner respect â€" which was often translated into a meal ticket. And on a few occasions, rekindled and strengthened old friendships.

"Oh come on, my brother!" Thuggory moaned. "What am I going to do when the cold sweat breaks, the legs start heading for the port and my father's already too drunk to stop me if I don't have my first man there to drag me back by the hair!" Hiccup laughed, puffing at the

bellows and then lowering the metal into the coals. "You can't still be thinking 'bout all that. The past's the past. Hel's teeth, we even asked you to become a Meathead and you wouldn't!"

The smile Hiccup gave him made Thuggory huff in frustrated resignation. They'd had this discussion an uncountable number of times. Folding his arms and resting against the door jamb, Thuggory went on a lot more quietly. "You're not Hiccup the Unwanted anymore, you know."

Doing his best not to stiffen up, the smith took the metal out of the heat as it glowed orange-red, and carried it to the anvil. "Thug, I just can't risk it." CLANG. "Someone may recognise me, and I don't know what they'd do." CLANG CLANK. "See, they may have declared me outlaw, or outcast even, and I'd â€¦ I'd much rather not find that out." CLANG CLANK CLANG CLANK. TINK. "Can you imagine the sort of drama that would create, for your wedding? Do you want that for Heather?"

The Meathead clan heir's face soured. "I still don't think it's fair."

"Life never is," Hiccup replied wistfully, dunking the metal into the bucket, where it hissed and bubbled merrily.

"You'll come after. You promised." At this point Hiccup laughed openly, resting on the anvil and making Toothless look at him askance.

"Thug, it'll be your honeymoon -"

"And then who will I brag to if you're not here? I DID get the prettiest girl in the archipelago!" The sleazy grin Thuggory gave him only made Hiccup laugh harder.

"Try Dogsbreath. And don't let the Bogs hear you say THEY'RE not the prettiest as well as the fiercest â€" you'll start a war."

"Fine! But you will come! You swore you'd come two weeks after the wedding!" Another grin. "That's enough time to leave my new missus reeling, I'd say?"

"Or her to tie you up to the bed."

"If I'm lucky!"

The laughter followed Thuggory out of the smithy. Hiccup kept his smile long enough for his friend to be out of sight (and to make sure he wasn't coming back to make a third pass at it, which wasn't beyond him), before he sighed and let himself slump.

In less than a moon, the Meathead territory would be full to the brim with the dignitaries of the whole archipelago, some he knew, some he did not. Some he knew well, like Cami and her mother, chief Bertha from Bog. And his own father, of course.

Of all the places he visited, only Thuggory and Cami had found out who he'd been before leaving Berk, all those years ago â€" and that was because they'd recognised the scrawny fellow they'd sometimes played with as children at The Thing. Hiccup suspected that Bertha

had her own mind, but had kept it to herself, while he was sure the Meathead chief had no idea who was currently smithing his horse shoes. Looking down at the rings he was making to fit around the handle of the ceremonial axes, he scoffed and got back to work. Thinking of what ifs and missing people who had probably rejoiced at his departure was a useless duty, like drawing in beach sand as the tide rises, he knew. Smithing, however, especially in a proper, old fashioned stall, made him acutely aware of how much he did miss them, how he wished that things could have been different, that HE could have been different, and that he could have grown into a man his father " and, maybe _she_ " could have loved.

"Wonder if Gobber misses me, at least," he murmured out loud, to be answered by Toothless' soothing croon. He gave his scaly friend a sardonic smirk in reply. "Yeah, he's probably croaked by now, with no one to hand him the different arms. Having to reach for your own hands takes a toll on a man, I suppose." He smiled at his own joke, imagining the irate smith-master, his vocal protests and the glare he would have received if Gobber had been in listening distance of that jibe.

The place in his heart where he'd never stopped hurting, and never stopped missing home, gave a twinge. He acknowledged it, and hammered on.

=0=

**I hope you enjoyed the first chapter. **

A look, five years down the line, at all three main characters. Events will begin to pick up momentum almost immediately next chapter, and narratorial voices will become much more varied.

A few cultural notes:

1- Hacknee, Astrid's father, had every right to demand a portion, if not all, of what Astrid gained at the docks. That he let her keep all of it is actually a clear sign that not only are her parents kind and generous, but that she's slightly indulged, probably as the only girl child and baby of the family. Hacknee would have passed it to his wife, who would then redistribute it with the household's supplies. As Astrid, at the moment, is a member of his household, everything she earns has to pass through his hands at least in part, as he technically owns her. The same was also true, although to a lesser the degree, of all of Astrid's brothers.

**2- When women married in Viking culture " or at least, Icelandic Vikings " they joined their husband's household, often living with up to seven other nuclear families in one hall as a single unit. This allowed the head of household to control the finances, have more manpower when it was needed (like during harvest time, or to man the boats), and literally have all the women together in one safe place. Women had more rights than other cultures; while women in Icelandic law weren't allowed to touch weapons, this obviously doesn't apply to Berk. However, women were allowed to own property, sign contracts, even have businesses and divorce their husbands. They kept their birth name " so Astrid would remain a Hofferson " but would still effectively become part of their husband's clan unless they divorced him. If she did leave him, she could take what was left of her dowry and the children with her. The couple during the wedding also

traditionally exchanged rings (thought to be the birth of our tradition today after the Scandinavian countries absorbed Christianity, and got the daughter of a Viking king to marry the holy Emperor) and swords. Thuggory decided that swords were for ninnies. For more information on weddings, google Viking Answer Lady. And Horrible Histories. The last, if not terribly serious, is more or less accurate and viciously amusing.**

3- I'm going to be a lot less nice to the dragons here than the PG-rated movie was allowed to be. There will be nothing graphic, but already you can see why the rating is so high (the highest it can go before people started asking me whether the story was going to take a dive into racier waters, in fact, and caused me to tone it down slightly). These are Vikings; they will not molly-coddle their enemies. I hated doing something so terrible to those poor terrors, but the story required it. I'm afraid we will not be seeing the little red terror with the pretty green eyes again, either. Readers can imagine what they will as regards to his fate.

4- Some of my crack pairings have started popping up. Heather/Thuggory is one of them. Thuggory here is not exactly his equivalent in the books "there is very little to go on there for the boy, other than that he's a decent chap. So here he's the heir of the Meatheads, a bit loud, a bit flamboyant, loves him some drama, has a good heart, and about to marry his manipulative, deviant sweetheart. Heather is the girl from the TV show, because I adored how wily and smart she is, and I couldn't help pairing someone who's down-to-earth and quick-thinking to a loud, fun, drama-queen lad. They are utterly bananas to write. There is one other crack-pairing. It will happen "slightly later".

I hope you all enjoyed the first chapter. The next will be out on Friday 7th February** `14.**

5. Wedding Gifts

This chapter sets the ball in place, and it is going to start rolling at massive speed. The pace will be quick as many things happen together "but for now, Welcome to Thuggory and Heather's wedding.

A quick note; Characters from the book are adopted into this story in a very cavalier manner, where they are not, necessarily, in the same role in this story as they are in the books. Dogsbreath, for instance, has been given a promotion and a personality transplant.

I would appreciate if you could all read the notes at the bottom, which help explain a number of elements that were not necessarily intrinsic to the story and would have bogged down the exposition side of things, but that I know some readers will be curious about.

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1_

**Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir**

* * *

><p>Wedding Gifts

The ribaldry and the din swelled like a physical thing, rippling up the hall's ceiling in waves before it burst against the ramparts and echoed back like a tide. Heather looked on with a giddy smile, quite unable to get the foolish expression off her face as she adjusted her bridal crown and stopped it from falling into her eyes again.

The majority of their ally clans had replied to the summons with a variety of numbers. The Bogs had only brought the Chief's family and two other women, enough to handle the small skiff they'd come in, while the Trollguts and UglyThugs had sent a modest longboat of people, as had the Beserkers and Hopeless. The Hooligans, on the other hand had climbed the horizon with fifteen longboats strong, and Brawlknife had initially thought they were answering some unintentional offense in their invitation until Stoick had greeted him cordially at the docks.

Her eyes automatically sought out her brand spanking new husband, running over the intoxicated crowds. When she spotted him, head down with Stoick the Vast, his father, and a select group of others, however, her smile did begin to fade; she knew that look. It was not one of Thuggory's happy looks. Fingering her loose black hair (down for the last time), she contemplated going to them for a moment, but even as she looked, the group broke up. Judging by the collective expression, no one had much liked the agreement they had come to, but none of them disliked it enough to come to blows about it, or worse.

Right away, Thuggory caught her searching eyes and flinched slightly, before his stormy expression cleared into a something else and he made a beeline for his high seat beside her.

"Which husband leaves his beautiful wife alone on her wedding day," he said with chagrin. Heather simply shook her head and kissed his cheek.

"I know I'm marrying the chief's son. Some things have to be done." She scooted closer to him. "That is forgiven; but I won't forgive you keeping secrets."

He smirked. He knew as well as she did that though her offer of an ear was genuine, she was also dying with curiosity. "I didn't intend to," he placated her, throwing an arm around and speaking in her ear so no one would overhear. It had other â€| interesting repercussions on her state of mind.

"So, I know you're wondering why half of Berk came to Freezing to Death for our wedding. Not that the heir to the Meathead tribe isn't worth that, but moving on," he began. She nodded against his shoulder. "Well, apparently because they're on the way to somewhere else. Somewhere else huge."

"This 'somewhere else' has this furrow on your face, then?" she asked, running a finger pad down the line of his frown. As always, it had the effect of smoothing it out.

"Yeah â€| amongst other things." He bit his lip and moved his head back far enough to look at her. "Look, you know the deal with

'Cattongue', right?" he said, and waited for her to nod before he continued. "Well, that's actually his old clan. The chief's his dad, and â€| well, you know how he is, stubborn as a buck in rut? His dad's worse." He gave an eloquent groan. "And they're about to do something very, very stupid."

"And you've got a solution that will have repercussions," Heather concluded with a smile. Thuggory grinned at her.

"I knew there was a reason I married you beyond the good looks and hotness!" he cackled, and took the punch to the gut gamely. "But yeah, there'll be repercussions alright â€| and I'm not even sure it's a solution. See, I'll tell it all â€| 'specially since the repercussions are mostly you. My dad, too, and yours, but you're the one who'll roast me on the spit for five nights and then roll me in salt in the morning."

Heather merely raised a brow at him, trying to hide her alarm. They were already married, so the fear she'd had of Brawlknife's often mercenary thoughts of marrying his son off for a profit had faded. However, this somehow sounded solidly similar. Thuggory winced again, and brought his mouth close to her ear once more, which did nothing to help her concentrate.

"Thing is, they're planning to do the completely crazy and impossible. They plan to sail the long way to Helheim's Gate, back around the Boggies and towards Berk, then straight starboard. And this time, I have a good hunch they'll manage to find Dragon Island. And once they're there â€|"

"â€|They all plan to get slaughtered," Heather finished, aghast. Those of them who were taught dragon riding had learned what truly lay at the bottom of Dragon Island, in a not-so-dormant state. It had helped that Hiccup had shown Thuggory what to do in order to deal with the worst offenders in the dragon pilfering league, all without hurting them, but Freezing To Death didn't suffer as badly as Berk did, being that apparently, based upon Hiccup's calculations, the Hooligan's home was a mere day away from the volcano isle as the dragon flies.

"Yup, that's pretty much their plan and they don't know it, either. None of us have agreed to go â€| All the chiefs up here North know what's on that isle, but there's no way to tell Stoick without telling him about our dragon companions and who told us about it. Dad tried to dissuade Stoick, but he's stuck on the idea as a dog on a bone. Which is why, I thought the best thing to do is go find Hiccup on Fanghorn's back, and try to head them off before they all get turned to ash."

Heather looked at him for a moment, blinking. "You plan to fly that half-wild dragon of yours across the ocean, towards an isle you barely know the coordinates of, to get a man you don't know will be interested in saving these people?"

"He'll be, I know it." Looking at his expression told her everything. Heather nodded in agreement, but she still pursed her lips.

"When do they plan to leave?" she asked, trying to calculate it all in her mind. Subtlety was her job in this relationship, and she was frighteningly good at it. The Hooligans were going to have a

considerable head-start, but even with favourable winds, there was a distance to travel, and they would only beat Hiccup to the isle by a few hours when he was riding a dragon.

"In two dawns, counting tomorrow," was the reply, and she nodded.

"At least I DO get a wedding night," she said cheekily, and enjoyed watching the great Meathead tribe heir blush to the roots. "I say you go after the morning gift, no one will come looking for you then if I stay in our bedroom." It was her turn to colour; she wasn't yet used to the plural.

"Ah, good plan! Hiccup left me the location of his island in case of emergency, and with Fanghorn I know I can get there by tomorrow night if we go really fast. Then we can just fly right to the island-"

"I want to know what's going on," hissed a voice right beside them. Thuggory and Heather jumped and swerved to find Cami's face inches from their own, looking mightily incensed. "And don't you dare tell me 'nothing', not unless you want Heather to be tragically widowed."

"Again with the sneaking," Thuggory growled. Cami simply smirked.

"What did you expect from the future chief of the Bog Burglars?" her chest puffed out, before she sat down more comfortably beside them. Dogsbreath stood stonily to the side waiting for Thuggory to signal, one way or another, what to do with the intrusion; the taciturn UglyThug Viking had only been outclassed by Hiccup in his propensity to utter a volume with one look. Glancing at Thuggory, Heather let him know once again that he had acquired a new set of nonverbal problems; she told him another little egg had hatched in her mind.

"Say; how are you and Sting coming along?" she asked Cami. The Boggy smirked.

"We're in business," she replied. Heather smirked back.

"Yes, we are," Heather replied smugly, and she could feel her new husband swallow beside her at her open display of her natural mischievous plotting. To help Hiccup, they were going to need all the help they could get, and Heather wasn't about to turn any grain away before the Winter.

=0=

Snotlout stood on the bow, one foot up on a barrel, back straight and chest out, watching the foam as the longboat cut the water, and felt proud. Here he was, the hero of his generation, standing tall and strong on the first longboat of their fleet as the Chief's family, headed for the mission of the century.

He snickered to himself; the other clans were all cowards. None of them had joined them, not even one longboat between the rest of the Viking archipelago was wrestled up among the ale-riddled participants of the wedding from the other isles of the barbaric territory. They, on the other hand, the proud Hooligan tribe were on their way to

become legends. There was nothing anyone could do now but to prepare their edda of triumph.

He looked back towards the aft. Astrid stood there, a hand keeping balance on one of the mast's tethers, taking deep breaths of sea-air. The stupidly precious axe, which had been unused for so long, was strapped to her back, the head covered in cloth so that none of the salt would get to it. It was the only thing that marred Snotlout's perfect mood; by all rights, she should have been his by now. He had never stopped pursuing her, because why should he? She was engaged to another coward who had escaped so he didn't have to fight the Nightmare or be chief, and who wasn't there to protect the woman who was supposed to be his property. A small voice in Snotlout's head told him Astrid needed little protection, and he ignored it. It was a man's place " and his right and privilege " to protect his property. Since Hiccup wasn't doing his job properly, it was no one's fault but his own if someone else ended up usurping it " or flirting with it. Another voice told him it was probably Hiccup who needed protection, and he listened to this one, snickered to himself and totally agreeing. Because after all, it was the truth, and Hiccup the Useless wasn't called that for nothing. He'd only been 'the Promising' for a short while, after all, and the longer his 'journey' lasted, the better.

Snotlout'd seen through her game though, he was sure of it. Take the place of the Useless. Get into the Chief's good graces. Secure herself in his household and then wait out the time until the traitor run-away could be safely proclaimed dead and claim the headship for herself. This would have the convenient side effect of making her available for marriage in one fell swoop, and in that moment he'd be _right there_.

Because, come on; who was she going to choose? Tuffnut? _Fishlegs the married guy_?

A large wave splashed noisily against starboard, bringing him back to the present. He looked back again, and noticed that Astrid had turned to speak with Stoick and Gobber; in fact, it looked like they were having a heated, if hushed, discussion. The stocky youth bristled, both in curiosity and in annoyance; he was Berk's promise from the new generation (except for Astrid, but she was a woman) and had therefore the right to be included in any important conversation. The fact that Stoick was there, and that both he and Astrid were getting red in the face, told him enough.

Seeing as his father was steering the sister longboat of the two point-ships leading the fleet, Snotlout felt no compunction in stepping as nonchalantly as possible within hearing range while appearing to be taking care of some tackle. If he didn't burst into the conversation, he told himself in his own mind, as he had the right to, it was only because they seemed to be heatedly into it already, and an interruption might dismantle their temper completely.

"|something we don't know, Stoick. I can feel it; you saw how they looked at one another and talked in whispers."

"And _I_ told _you_, that is because they were all sure we were lunatics to take this voyage. Hel, _I'm_ sure we're lunatics to do so, but we have no alternatives now. This idea was yours, Astrid, why

are you hesitating now?"

"It's not that, Stoick. Something â€| some of the way in which they talked and looked at one another. It didn't bode well for us." Her thunderous expression had receded from furious red to a more thrumming, underlying energy. Gobber put a hand on her shoulder.

"It's a'right, lass. We know this won't be a walk on the beach. We're ready for anything that Isle will throw at us. And if we're notâ€| eh!" He shrugged his massive shoulder.

"We're Vikings, It's an occupational hazard."

Astrid didn't look convinced, but before she could say anything else, Sven yelled from the aft.

"Gate, sighted!"

The call was echoed eerily by the other 45 longboats in the fleet. They had joined the rest of them after the wedding on Freezing To Death, proceeding here as speedily as the winds allowed, which had taken long enough. And now, finally, they were there.

"Bring the terrors up!" Stoick bellowed, his frame going rigid. The rest of the longboat crew felt the change in him, and the tension bled like a spilt pail of yak milk across every pair of shoulders on board, then down the line of ships.

The pathetic creatures were brought up, snarling through her muzzles. Their legs were tied, but their wings were not, and once the rope harness around their torso was attached to the mast, they began flapping frantically; all towards Helheim's Gate.

What followed was a tense, horrible journey through the fog. Filed in a straight line, the boats began to navigate the treacherous, narrow channels. No Viking boat had ever come this far, and even later, Snotlout wouldn't remember much of this high-adrenaline, silent part of the ride save snatches. Astrid, unfurling the cloth around her axe; Stoick steering and giving instructions, which all the fleet followed in the hushed awe that seemed to have overtaken everyone; the terrors, flapping more and more frantically as they swerved this way and that on their tethers, always in unison.

Suddenly they were all struggling to remain upright as the boat marooned on a black rock beach. The croon that had been getting louder and louder, and been setting everyone's teeth on edge and everyone's voices to just above a whisper, was deafening now. A crimson tail disappeared into the rock face, and Snotlout almost felt it run up his belly and his back; it was happening. They were-

"We're here," Stoick hissed, jumping off the boat. The crooning stopped instantly. The terrors blinked, looked around, and began making screeching noises as they flew to the mast and tried to climb up it as far as their harness allowed, sharp claws sinking into the wood. Just as Snotlout excitedly rushed to the boat edge to join the preparations, he spotted Astrid looking at the dragons with narrowed eyes.

"You coming?" he said, giving her his best smile, and puffing his chest out to give her his best prospect. Her eyes narrowed further, never leaving the terrors, who were now scrambling up the mast against their ropes. They probably knew they were no longer useful now; there was no need for them to stay alive.

And right on cue, Astrid swung her axe; but instead of Terror heads, it cut through the ropes and dented the mast. The three tiny dragons flapped their wings as hard as they could, rope still dangling like an umbilical cord, as they hightailed it back into the fog.

"You missed," he said, putting a magnanimous tone. "Don't worry, babe, it happens to the best of us â€" even me, believe it or not. You should have brought your other axe; that one's old."

Astrid had pursed her lips and ignored him, eyes trained on the exiting dragons. On the last sentence she turned her narrowed eyes on him.

"Shut up and get to it," she said. With one fluid move, she was on the skittering rubble and jogging towards the ramparts builders. Snotlout huffed.

"I'll get you yet, and then we'll see how much you like snippy," he grumbled to himself, jumping off to join his father.

=0=

"Absolutely not!" Hiccup bellowed, yelling more than he strictly needed to be heard over the wind.

"As if you have a say in it!" Thuggory replied just as crossly. "You're not the chief of me! And even he has trouble putting a leash on all this!"

Hiccup winced. "You just got married!" Their dragons began dipping as Freezing To Death came in sight, and Thuggory had to struggle slightly to stop Fanghorn from doddering off to wherever he wanted to go on the island, instead of the main village square.

"And the woman is in total agreement!" As they landed, Hiccup steered Toothless to perform a somersault that brought them to land in front of Thuggory's thunderdrum, cutting them off. "Show off!"

"I won't let you, Thuggory. There is just no way. In fact, I'm going off right now; I couldn't let you fly out here on your own, with neither you nor Fang' being accustomed to flying alone yet, but I've already lost a whole day coming here, and I'll lose another making it to the Gate if you come. There isn't any way in which you can fly fast enough-"

"Thuggory! You found him!"

Hiccup's tirade was interrupted by Heather, who ran up to the two mounted men, her emerald green Nadder following behind her mellowly. Hiccup huffed in annoyance at being interrupted, but still smiled at the new bride.

"Heather!" he called out. "Thank you for interrupting your honey

month to come and warn me."

"Hey, I did all the work!" Thuggory objected, and Fanghorn gave a snort. Hiccup reached down and patted the massive dragon between the eyes.

"Thank you, too." Before he could say something else (and before Thuggory could whine anymore), Heather began fastening a number of bags to her Nadder's saddle, who bent placidly to let her do so in comfort. Dogsbreath followed with a Gronkle, who stopped every few paces to eat a pebble or two. "_What_ are you guys doing?!"

"Isn't it obvious?" the woman quipped back, patting her braids and tightening the saddle on Clover. "We're coming with."

"That's out of th-"

"What's going on here!"

Hiccup couldn't stop his face from splitting into a smile. It was the first time he'd been more than a little glad to see the chief of the Meatheads.

"Son, you're suppose` ta be locked up in'a that hut of yours, screwing the lights out of this girlie here!" Ok, already less glad to see him. Toothless gave a painful groan â€" his dragon was even less used to 'Viking subtlety' than Hiccup himself was. "Instead I find you out here, with these scallywags, off ta go on a caper. What's the story?!"

"Dad!" Thuggory responded before Hiccup could intervene. "Cattongue's off to save those stupid Hooligans, and I'm not about to let him go alone."

"And what business is it of yours!" the Chief bellowed back, standing akimbo and looking slightly on the mead. "In fact, what business do you have bein' out of that hut and not making me grandbabies!" Hiccup had the decency not to snicker, despite how red Thuggory's ears got. "Why, I ought to put you over m' knee and spank you like the lad you are, get back inside!"

A chill went down Hiccup's back, and he sat up straighter on Toothless. That order reminded him of another time, and he suddenly cottoned on to exactly what the worst case scenario to this hare-brained venture of his could be. A part of him hadn't yet realised what he was about to do; he was about to save half of Berk from its stupidity, yes, but in the process, he was going to expose himself to them, again. The feelings of being Hiccup the Useless, Hiccup the Unwanted, resurfaced uncomfortably through the layers of self-assuredness he'd gained in the past years, and he lost a precious few seconds to trample them down.

Seconds within which Cami, wearing her armour and a wide leer, landed her changewing right beside the Meathead chief, who jumped, and turned to glare at her.

"Yeah, stay at home Thug-Thug, while he and I go save the day and hog all the glory." The sing-song tone only made her condescending, half-lidded look worse. "It's no place for little boys. Though of course, Cattongue can take it." She turned her leer towards him, a

wink ready on her eye.

"What!" Thuggory's father seemed to have increased three sizes, going red in the face as his chest swelled with anger. "Never let it be said tha' a Meathead didn't do something a Bogger did!"

"No one said that but you, Chief," Cami went on, completely unafraid of enraging the Meathead Chief. Everyone knew not to make war with the Bog Burglars â€" not only were they jaw-droppingly powerful in battle. Odds were you would wake up on the morning of the battle in just your underpants, as you'd been robbed blind during the night â€" even if you were awake and on patrol. "And anyway, I agree. 'S no place for little boys. Not like Stoick will be grateful, or anything, and might sign a new treaty with you. After all, the constant dragon fighting hasn't made them tough at all; not good allies in a fight. They may not even need our help!"

Reverse psychology, fortunately, didn't always work.

"That's right!" the Chief said, pushing his fists farther into his hips. "Stoick's a good man and knows a good way to Valhalla, but he also wouldn't slaughter his own folk. He'll know a lost battle when he sees one, and he'll retreat."

"You obviously don't know him," Hiccup replied before he could stop himself. There was a moment of silence as the Chief turned to look at him.

"What'ya mean by that, boy?" Hiccup â€" or Cattongue as Chief Brawlknife knew him â€" had never once said a word out of place to Thuggory's father, as he was too conscious of his position as a guest every time he visited. But now, the tension was mounting on Hiccup's shoulders as he felt every moment passing by as if it were a dear life lost â€" like Gobber, or his father, or Phlegma, who always gave him honeyed berries as a child, or her â€" and the caution could sod off with the wind. "It's n'a like you can speak for the Hooligan Chief as if y'a knew him-

"I would know my own father!" he said, finally losing his patience. Steering Toothless around, he took his helmet off its place tied on Toothless' saddle and slammed it on, securing it at the back by sliding the metal plates in place. It was a mistake, of course; he'd spoken out of turn and said too much. If he survived this battle, he would have one place less to go to, and he quite liked Freezing. But the odds of that were slim.

"Stoick's boy!" Then the Chief did something unexpected. He burst out laughing. Hiccup blinked at him through the eye-holes. "Oh I should've seen it coming! He's been on and on at every Thing, talking about how his boy's out advent'ring. And who's the only one's been coming and going these years? Is you that's who is!" Hiccup blinked back at him, not quite knowing what to think of that. Brawlknife stood straighter and went serious (or as serious as his ruddy cheeks and state of at least slight inebriation could allow). "What you waiting for then, boy? Off you get after your people." He made a hand-waving motion, then turned to Thuggory. "And you, you'd better go off and come back better than this one. We can't have the Hooligans being the ones with a better heir'n the Meatheads! We'd lose our reputation!"

Hiccup groaned behind his mask as the rest of his friends turned sly

expressions on him. He'd unknowingly convinced the chief to let them go. Thuggory slapped his armoured shoulder. Within moments, Dogsbreath had gotten on Farthog and Heather had leapt on Clover, leaving them all looking at Hiccup expectantly. Dogsbreath's father, the Chief of the UglyThugs, was nowhere in sight, but Hiccup could simply delay no longer.

"Fine. But I'm making this up as I goâ€¦ literally. Let me think some on the way there, and then I'll tell you what we'll do. Deal?"

"Deal with it," Cami answered cheekily. Hiccup sighed.

"Alright, team," he said, steeling his voice. The time to be sorry for himself about losing the argument would come later. "Let's go."

With a leap, the dragons left the island one after the other, headed towards Helheim's gate.

=0=

****And the real action begins â€¦****

**** Most of you will probably be surprised that this is happening so quickly â€" please trust that the plot of this story is slightly different. Hiccup is a kind-hearted man hardened by life here, and drawing him out of his island and vagabond life necessitated something rather massive (pun intended), and that needs to occur first for him to face his past.****

****1) A note on the Tribes: Hiccup's teachings have NOT been overtly shared between tribes, except the Meatheads, Bog Burglars and UglyThugs who know of each other, for the same reason that Stoick hides all the dragons on Berk the first time Dagur appears as the new Berserker chief. Every tribe who had dragon companions could be seen as a threat by all the others, meaning that it has all been kept discreet. Hiccup has encouraged this, as it helps him keep his own secrecy while he travels the Viking archipelago.****

****The younger generations, of course, are more lax about things, especially since Thuggory and Cami already know who Hiccup is. These three tribes are also much closer together geographically than they are to Berk, so it is relatively easier to 'hide' the dragons from Berk. Berk is too busy fighting them off, and has no time to go snoop around their ally islands which are a long boat-ride away.****

****2) Which leads to Geography: Freezing to Death of the Meatheads and the UglyThug Island are relatively close together, and slightly further south between them is the Bog Burglar's island. Berserker Island is further South, on the same latitude as the Outcast Island, and the Trollguts's island is farther out West. Further down South then are Berk, Dragon Island, and Hopeless. Not all these tribes will be relevant to this story, and this geographical arrangement is completely arbitrary on my part because it is required for the story's timing.****

****3) A note on Snotlout: The Snot-man is one of my favourite characters, because he's irreverent, arrogant, more than a little stupid and utterly entertaining to watch as he blusters around. Sort of like a boxer puppy, battling against a huge teddybear and thinking**

he's winning when it falls over.**

That said, his arrogance and ego have gone mostly unchecked and untested for five years here, the edges dulled by Hiccup's intellect, and the slight boyish hero-worship he developed for his cousin in the film, missing from his life in this continuity. He has therefore developed a head as big as the Red Death's arse, and it is going to need knocking down a few pegs before he can be safely adorable at a close distance again.

A public thank you to all those reviewers who have left a note as 'guests'. I cannot thank you personally, as you are not logged in, but your reviews are not any less appreciated.

The next chapter will be out on Friday 14**th**** Febraury `14.**

6. What Jormungandr Wrought

Berk, meet the Red Death. Red Death, meet Berk. And a very unlikely chivalry â€|

Warning: some (mythical) animal cruelty.

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - l_

**Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir**

* * *

><p>What J_Ã¶__rmungandr Wrought _

Stoick couldn't believe what he was seeing.

When they'd cracked the mountain open, and all the lizards had fled, he'd thought their victory had been an unexpectedly easy one, and he wasn't one to argue with the gods over a gift given. But their victory cries had barely stopped echoing the first time before the roar caught them unawares, and then the mountain had cracked open, and that ... _thing_ had emerged. Immediately, the ranks had broken and panic had spread wildly as people tried to get away. Brave soldiers stayed as close as they could, trying to bring it down with flung rocks from the machines, but when the monster had taken one of their catapults in its jaws and reduced it to tinder, it was a madman or two who stayed behind.

"Get to the ships!" someone yelled.

"No, NO!" the bellow burst out of Stoick almost before he knew what he was saying, but to his horror he saw it was too late as the monstrous creature opened its mouth, aimed at the ships and-

BOOM

The beast rocked on its massive feet with the force of the shot â€" of what seemed to be dragon fire. Stoick, with Spitelout, Gobber, and

the younger Vikings around them, found themselves staring open-mouthed as five dragons flew around the larger one, looking like gadflies, and began attacking it in earnest.

"Isn't thatâ€¦ That's Thuggory and his wife!" Spitelout suddenly said, pointing towards the nadder and the thunderdrum. All of them winced in unison as the thunderdrum began concussing the larger dragon from one side, and the nadder used the distraction to shoot its spines into its eye on the left side of its face. After an angry roar, it opened two more eyes and snapped at the nadder, only to find itself with a mouthful of acid and melting teeth as a changewing came out of nowhere.

"That's the Bog Burglar heir!" Gobber yelled, pointing his hammar hand up at what seemed to be an impossible scene.

"Move, Dogsbreath!" someone yelled, and when the gronkle had finished depositing lava onto the creature's left foot after the thunderdrum dizzied it up some more, an unmistakable sound was heard.

"NIGHT FURY!"

"GET DOWN!"

Stoick and Astrid where the only two who didn't shelter themselves behind the shields, and like a drugr out of Helheim, a streak of blackness fell out of the sky and an explosion of blue fire almost blinded them.

"Stoick!" Gobber gasped beside them, quickly throwing his shield aside. "That's a night fury." His head swung around to follow the creature's movements in the sky, but it was almost too fast for the eye to follow. The figure on top â€" by Thor, the night fury had a rider too â€" began pointing, yelling half-heard orders, which the others all obeyed without question. The changewing winked in and out of sight, every time only to deliver a shower of acid or to save another rider and dragon from being bitten in half. The nadder made use of its fire rarely, but effectively, once intervening when the gronkle and its rider fell to the ground and were almost trampled as they had been caught in the cross-fire of the thunderdrum's roars, which were almost constant.

"He's leading them, Stoick!" Astrid yelled, eyes never leaving the battle as her white knuckled hand gripped the axe. "This isn't just a sudden thing. They know what they're doing, and the one on the night fury is telling them what to do_!"

"So what!" Snotlout said angrily, hefting a hammer and suddenly looking enraged. "This is our battle, our glory! They're mad, and he's no Viking! I'm going in there and showing them how it's done!" He was promptly clobbered on the head by his father.

"Go for the wing joint in its back! Heather, spines â€" Cami, be ready with it RIGHT as it hits!"

Two female voices yelled in assent, and moments later the half-blinded, bleeding beast roared again as both the joints on its back were broken and acid had been poured in the wounds. The night fury whistled into another attack, this time aimed at one of the monster's back legs, and the creature stumbled, but didn't

fall.

"Thor damn it all, we need more fire power!" Thuggory yelled, then yelled some more as what was left of the ten foot teeth tried to take a bite out of him and his mount. The nimble sea-dragon swerved out of the way and returned to give the creature a roar full in the face with Thuggory barely holding on. It groaned, and the night fury made another pass at its front legs. Though the blow threw it on its side, the massive dragon got up again, this time giving a roar of its own before it started shooting streams of fire fifteen feet across, swinging its head haphazardly and unpredictably.

Screams erupted. All the dragon riders scattered like startled flies. Some of the ships caught fire. The rider of the gronkle was almost taken into the fire, crashing literally in Stoick's lap as gravel flew everywhere. The night fury and its rider fell out of the sky, and suddenly there was large black barrier between them and the torching flames. Stoick looked up, having not even realised that he had taken Astrid's head down and crouched behind his shield as sparks and smoke rose, to find that both dragons had placed themselves as a living shield in front of their riders, and thus conveniently in front of them, too. He heard Astrid gasp and Gobber swear, but the dragons merely shook off the fire and turned to their riders again. Or at least, the gronkle did.

"_Loki's balls_," the taller one hissed angrily as what appeared to be a saddle smouldered. He slapped it until it smoked, ignoring the burns that had to be forming on his hand.

"Is it usable?" the gronkle's rider asked.

"Damn it all, the connecting wire!" the other hissed back, voice distorted by his helmet. Quickly, he took a new rope from a pouch on the intact saddle side and began hastily cutting charred rope and replacing it. "GO! Go help the others! Tell Heather and Cami to repeat performance on its legs â€" go for a knee or elbow joint! I'll be back up as soon as I can!"

"What orders for me, Cattongue?"

"You're the only one who can hover â€" keep clear of the head, but keep close enough to distract this thing off any of the others if they get too close. Back of the head should be a blind spot by now because we've taken all the back eyes out â€" oh for Thor's mercy, Thuggory's stopped! Go up there; tell him to start Fanghorn blasting again! We have to keep it dizzy, the dizzier the better!"

"How can we help!" Stoick suddenly roared, standing at his full height. The gronkle rider hesitated for a second before his leader yelled at him to go, turning to Stoick. A chill went down the Hooligan's back as cold green eyes turned to him through the slit in his mask, and the dragon turned eyes of the same colour on him as well. He felt himself being weighed and measured, and for a terrifying moment, he thought he'd be found wanting.

"We want to help!" Astrid came up beside him, and both sets of green eyes turned to her. The dragon looked just as untrusting, but the eyes behind the mask widened. Looking back towards the dragon, he nodded, and Stoick thought he was seeing things when the black beast gave him what seemed unmistakably to be an incredulous look, before

the man put a hand on its head, hissing _trust me_.

"Do you have any catapults left?" he asked, turning to him and Astrid. Stoick turned to take stock, and saw one, half-charred on one side but still functional. "Load it; use it to try to distract it. Don't aim for the dragon because you may hit one of us, but make noise, throw them at its feet or near its tail, try to help us hit it while its attention is elsewhere. And for the love of Odin, _do not draw its attention to yourselves_!" He hissed so powerfully that it was startling. There was real anger in his voice, and disappointment, both emotions incongruous to a stranger.

"Right! Snotlout, Fishlegs! Call Tuffnut, let's go!"

Before Stoick could utter a word, Astrid and the youngsters were racing across the skittering gravel towards the war machine. After following them with his eyes, the night fury rider went back to his ropes with quick and nimble fingers and moments later he was leaping back onto the dragon.

"Wait!" Stoick caught his arm and both heads whipped around. He found himself the sudden focus of two sets of green eyes again. "Who _are_ you?"

There was a beat of silence, the battle raging behind them almost smothered as both sets of eyes considered him.

"Friends," he said simply, breaking the spell, shrugging Stoick's grip off and leaping upwards into the sky with such strength that the Hooligan chief was thrown on his back. Gobber and Spitelout helped him up.

"Come on," He told them. "Let's do our part." Both nodded back at him, and they raced to try to help the youngsters man the catapult.

=0=

Thuggory would never admit it out loud, but he was having, simultaneously, the best and worst time of his life. Every time he saw Heather dip in and out of range of those massive teeth or claws his heart did a somersault into his stomach. But when he was the one taunting death and peeking at the gates of Helheim between those jaws, it was the moment he knew eddas would be written about him in days to come. After all, they were battling Jǫrmungandr, and they were _winning_.

Well, ok, maybe not winning, but they were certainly keeping it at bay.

A rock flew up in a lazy arch and hit the gravel off the right side. The monstrous creature whipped its head around and snapped at air. Cami promptly emptied a new acid load onto its left front leg. An ear-splitting whistle later, the acid was on fire, and their opponent began bellowing as its scales began to flake off.

"Not so fireproof after all!" yelled Hiccup triumphantly. An echoing roar came from behind them, and Thuggory pointed Fanghorn's nose up, then turned him around to look. Hooligans were working like ants a good two hundred feet away, manning a catapult and filling it with

large rocks and gravel. Another group seemed to be labouring to push another surviving war machine into position.

"What the hell do they think they're doing?" he yelled at Hiccup.

"Following orders. They're going to help you distract it. Now get back in there, we need Fanghorn!"

The dragon beneath him puffed up. "You hear that, boy? Let's go show them how it's done!"

Three roars later, the mountainous thing was trying to spread its wings, and it simply wouldn't _go down_.

"We're not doing enough damage!" Dogsbreath said, voicing his thoughts.

"We will now!" Hiccup yelled. Thuggory found himself smirking; when Hiccup used that tone, it meant he'd lost his patience, and _that_ meant he was done being nice. And when someone with Hiccup's brain stopped being nice â€" "Cami, Heather, go for all the joints in the wing! 'Breath, you flame the left wing, I'll take the other. Thug â€" get behind its crest and have Fang go at it with everything he has, then _hightail_ it out of there at my signal_, everyone! Get into positions!"

The dragons flew them there almost before they could direct them, and they all waited â€" one tense, never-ending second â€" until Hiccup, who was looking down, clenched his fist and went, "NOW!"

Heather let lose first, hitting her mark as she and Clover always did. The dragon didn't have time to bellow that Cami and Sting didn't follow through with fresh acid into the new wounds, emptying all her reserves, then Dogsbreath and Hiccup lit the fuse which went up like it was Snoggletog, and Fanghorn opened his mouth, aiming at the back of its head.

"Hold!"

The monster bellowed, trying to drown out Thuggory'd thunderdrum and not quiet managing. Hiccup circled upwards and swung his arm, and after half a second yelled "OUT! GET OUT!" with all his strength. All of them directed their dragons up or to the side, and within a moment, they all discovered why.

A cascade of rocks left one of the catapults and landed directly at the monster's feet. It almost screamed, scrambled back, tried to open its wings, screamed again. Then Hiccup swooped in one last time, hitting it with night fury fire in the back of the head â€" almost gently â€" and the creature did the stupidest thing Thuggory had ever seen anything do â€" it hit itself on the head with its own bludgeon tail.

Making a noise like a dying yak, the creature wobbled, then keeled over on one side. Hiccup circled once before landing beside one of the catapults, and Thuggory quickly followed, as did the others.

"â€| have to be quick, it won't be long before it comes to again.

Gather everyone as quickly as possible, and sail out of here immediately"-

"We'll only get lost in the fog," a blonde woman stepped in. "We only made it here because the terrors led usâ€" I let them loose before it all started."

"I'll lead you out," Hiccup said, "but we have to hurry, we don't have much time! There are people who ran all the way to the other side of the island, and we have to get them here before we sail!"

"We'll get those," Cami said gamely. Hiccup shook his head.

"It won't work. They won't come with you. We have to have someone on a boat before we can try to find them, or someone has to come with us on the dragons that they can recognise. They never would listen to us."

"I will come with you," Stoick said at once. The blonde girl interjected again.

"We can both go. That way, two people can do the round up twice as fast, and Gobber and Spitelout can direct things back here."

"Good plan, lass," the chief nodded, and looked around. Hiccup swallowed uncomfortably then turned to the other riders.

"I'll take her," he pointed towards the blonde. "Heather, can you please take Chief Stoick? Our dragons are the fastest; we'll cover most ground. 'Breath, Farthog's strength will help load things quicker. Please do that. Thug, Cami, keep an eye on that thing. If it wakes up, get Fanghorn to call as loud as he can, we'll come screaming back."

"As you say, boss," Cami said with a mock salute, but got into position right away. Hiccup and Heather mounted up. The blonde woman got behind Hiccup with little problem, while Stoick needed some help (and convincing) to get on Clover. Within moments, however, they were gone.

Quick as enterprising termites, the Hooligans who were left on the beach began loading the longboats that hadn't been smashed, burned or turned into chew toys, salvaging what they could for the return journey as quickly and efficiently as possible. Nobody was making any noise, as much as they could, but the creature lying prostrate on the gravel still stirred and grunted occasionally, standing Thuggory's hair on end. All their dragons were tired, and he knew Sting was out of acid.

Flames were still licking the wounded dragon, rising from the its wings and sides where the acid had been lit. That it was still alive was a testament to how hardy it was. Fanghorn scuttled carefully over the gravel, his slim legs sinking between the stones unsteadily, before he took to the air with an annoyed huff and landed beside Sting.

"That was some fight," Cami said with pride. "Totally a win for the Bog Burglars."

"And the Meatheads and UglyThugs," Thuggory replied huffily. Cami shrugged.

"And the Hooligans too, though they don't know it." They both looked back at the people scuttling up and down the boat. "Idiots have no idea."

"Do you think he's alright? With that Hooligan girl so close, I mean," Thuggory said with a frown, "it mustn't be too comfortable for him."

"Oh, I'll bet," Cami said, turning to look at him with a leer. "In fact, if I'm right about certain things, and I'm almost sure I am, he's stiff and uncomfortable, in a variety of places."

"â€|what?" he answered, perplexed. Damned Boggies, they could never give you a straight answer.

Cami looked at him like he was an annoying three year old. "Don't you remember the girl he fell for hard when he was 11?" she said impatiently. "You can't have forgotten! Dear gods, if I didn't see Heather walk funny, I'd still think you were a virgin!"

"Oi, it's not like almost ten years haven't passed since"-

Their conversation stopped short when a bellow came out of the downed creature. They turned their heads, and Thuggory's eyes opened at their widest to see it looking back at him; it was awake again.

"Loki's stinking shit!" he hissed, and clenched his reins to pull Fanghorn up. Before he could, however, the dragon open its massive jaws, displaying missing teeth and bleeding, melted gums from their attacks. "Out of the way!"

The mounted riders quickly rose to the sky, diving to remove Gobber from aboard the ship while all the others ran screaming as the massive dragon sucked air in. As they gained altitude, and luckily everyone was clear, it let loose.

"What the â€|"

Ash and green dust came out of the dragon's mouth, coating everything in front of it until it disappeared from sight, only reappearing when the dust had settled. It gave a bellow, dragging itself to its feet, and then began walking back to the crack in the mountain, wings hanging uselessly and making tracks in the gravel behind it.

"It's retreating!" a shrill-voiced man said, a younger man who looked remarkably like him joining in the cheers and knocking helmets with him.

"We can't let it go, now's the time to strike it down!" someone else said.

"If we attack it now, we'll"-

"Die," Cami said nonchalantly as she and Thuggory landed, Gobber helped to slide down the changewing's back safely. "It's still got more than enough fight in it, and our dragons are almost wiped out."

In fact, who's to say that stuff isn't poisonous?"

"True," Gobber said. "Someone go take a look at the fish, see if there's any belly-up before you touch anything. Damn it all for these being our last sea-worthy boats."

"You can always come back on dragons," Cami said, and evil smirk in place.

"If there were any around," Gobber said, waving his hand in a wide arc. It seemed, in fact, as if all the smaller dragons had flown as fast as their wings could carry them as far as they could. Dragon island was all but deserted.

"They'll come back," Thuggory said.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Cami murmured as she looked towards the retreating giant, tail wet with its own blood from its blow to the head.

=0=

"There! Everyone, head back! Quickly!"

Astrid yelled as hard as she could, shifting her grip on the man in front of her from shoulder to waist as she waved frantically at the large number of people below. Some readied their weapons, but once they heard her, they came running towards them.

"Astrid!" one of them yelled, and Astrid was relieved to see her father and two of her brothers. She almost slid off the night fury in mid-flight, but the rider angled the night fury downwards. It landed with a near-silent thump, and Astrid ran to hug them all instantly. "Thank Thor and all the halls of Asgard."

"Head back the way you came," the rider said impatiently. The night fury beneath him seemed to feel it and trampled the ground in agitation, but a palm on its head calmed it down. "We need to move forward to make sure no one else is ahead."

"Who are you to tell me what to do!" one of Astrid's brothers quipped. The rider stiffened, and the night fury growled at the offender.

"No one. Do whatever you like," he replied evenly, still rubbing the dragon's head, "but we've neutralised it temporarily, and that thing can come around at any moment. The boats will be leaving as soon as they filled up.

"Are you coming?" he asked her, voice flat as he turned to her. His eyes stared at her through the mask with something close to detachment, but not quite unfeeling coldness. Something sparked in the back of her mind, but she blinked and it was gone. "We have to circle around until we meet Heather, and then bring up the rear to make sure we didn't miss anyone. We've no time for this."

"Coming." She ignored her brother's protests. "Go find Gobber and Spitelout, they could use a hand with everyone to evacuate!" The night fury rose rapidly, and she waved before she had to hang on again.

Something wasn't quite right with what she had just seen, though. Between looking for people beneath them (and desperately ignoring the fact that she was on a _dragon_), Astrid catalogued the attributes of the man in front of her; he was tall, tall enough to look almost all the men, even Stoick, in the eye. He had wide shoulders that tapered off into a slim waist " in fact, he had slim everything. His legs and arms were hard to touch wherever she'd hung on, but there was not a lick of fat on him, which meant that he'd grown up seeing hard times, or that he was naturally this lanky.

She banished the thought of another lanky boy she knew. There was no time to think of that, even if she caught herself fingering her amulet every few seconds. The ride on the dragon nobody had ever seen was dizzying, and she was too occupied trying to signal every soul she saw and making sure she missed no one to stop to think on it, which she didn't want to anyway.

Soon, they could see no one else, and eventually passed a bright green nadder, whose rider circled her around much like the other rider did his night fury until they were facing one another in mid-air.

"We pointed them back to the boats!" Stoick bellowed. Astrid smiled. The man in front of her nodded and answered.

"It's best if you go bring the rear that way and I do the same on this side, now. That way both crowds will have seen their chief at least once."

"Roger that. See you at the bay!" the girl, Heather, replied. Astrid's eyes lingered on her as they flew in different direction until the rock face hid them from view.

"To think, only a few days ago she was dressed like a bride," she said, and then could have stabbed herself for having sounded almost wistful. Sitting up straighter, she quickly clarified. "Must be good, to know you'll still be allowed to fight."

"Thuggory couldn't keep her down if he tried," he snorted in reply. The dragon seemed to enjoy the comment and sniggered " or Astrid was just very tired and very concussed. Still, she had enough brain left about her to catch the opening.

"You know them well, then," she asked. The body under her fingers went stiff as iron.

"They're friends."

He had clammed up, slammed down almost immediately with deathly force. This only made her more curious.

"I see." She hedged for a moment as the dragon's flying pace slowed once they caught up with the crowd. "Keep walking!" she yelled once they were spotted. He hadn't spoken to any of the villagers directly since her brother had confronted him, she noticed, but every time he spoke to anyone, there was a quiet authority of someone who was used to giving orders, or at least instructions. She catalogued that fact with the others, wondering if Stoick had also noticed. After another moment of silence, and a few halloos to the people below, she

attacked again. "So they asked you to come help us here?"

"Something like that," he answered. Evasive again. Time to be direct.

"And yet," she asked with a grin, "you were leading them. You're their leader."

Their flight faltered and he yelped. The night fury slapped his thigh with one of the flaps framing its head. "Yeah, yeah, I'm on it." He turned to her and gave her a beady eye. "Miss, can we leave the questions for later? I have to steer here."

"Don't think so. You're not going anywhere up here." His eyes widened and he looked forward again, mumbling something to himself that was distorted to gibberish by the mask. "Don't lie. You were the one giving orders, and almost all those people there are clan heirs; they don't take orders from just anyone. You have the best dragon of them all." The night fury gave a puff of smoke, and Astrid blinked. It seemed to be able to understand norsk, and was â€|_preening_? Who knew. "Who are you, and why did you come to help us? If you want something in return, be warned; we don't have much except the clothes on our backs and the food on our tables. You're welcome to both, for this, but not much else."

"I â€| help people, miss," he said hesitantly. "I met the others that way, and taught them about dragons. That's all I do."

Time to be more direct. Astrid punched him in the side, causing him to wince and yelp.

"Ow!"

"Stop evading my question! Why did you come to help us!"

"Because I knew you'd all be slaughtered!" he hissed back, his elbows closing around his ribs for protection. Wuss. He looked back at her and she motioned with her head for him to continue, at which he signed in resignation, much to her satisfaction. "Toothless brought me here, once, soon after we â€| met. That giant dragon has a call that draws the others in when they hear it, and it caught Toothless this one time. So I knew what was here."

"Toothless?"

"Him." He gestured to the dragon. Astrid looked at the man incredulously. "What?"

"That's a lousy name. Tooth- even for a Viking! He deserves better! A night fury, for Thor's sake!"

"It's Viking tradition, miss!"

"Talking about names, stop calling me that! I'm not a snot-nosed little girl." Someone hollered from below. She waved, and yelled for them to follow the others.

"Ah, I'm sorry. You must be married, of course." Astrid's eyes narrowed in annoyance as a feeling she did not like to acknowledge pushed its way up her chest. She punched him, this time harder, on

the shoulder. "OW!" His shoulder pad absorbed most of that. He really was a wuss.

"Are you blind or is the dragon just the smart one between you two?" She was sure the reptile actually sniggered this time. "Is my hair up? I'm even wearing my kransen still!" She huffed at him when he shot her a rather abashed look through the helmet. She sighed then, looking down at the people scurrying beneath them. It all looked so strange, from so high up and flying so fast. "Well, I am engaged," she conceded, cutting him some slack. "But he is â€¦ missing."

"Ah." She really was imagining things, because the dragon beneath her suddenly went stiff, and the rider's voice sounded tight. Was she seeing things that weren't there in her attempt to understand this very bizarre stranger, or where his behaviours really were, and simply for reasons she had not yet discovered and understood? "I am sorry, miss. I hope he is found, soon."

"Hmm," she replied. "I need to tell him some things he needs to hear," she murmured darkly, thinking of how many times she needed to apologise to Hiccup for his forgiveness before realising what she was saying to someone she did not know, and honestly could be her enemy, or barking mad for riding a dragon. Not to mention, men were always uncomfortable with talk of this sort. She decided to wrench the subject back on track; she needed to learn about him, and the less he discovered about her beyond the basics, the better. "And don't call me that! Just Astrid will do!" He gave her a swift uncomfortable glance. She huffed. "Or Hofferson, if you really must."

He nodded. "Hofferson, then." She huffed at him again, annoyed beyond words at his forced formality. It didn't bode well that the one leading this group of, apparently, heirs to the rest of their allied tribes wanted to remain so detached and aloof. "Oh, no."

This snapped her attention right away; even more so when she felt their dragon mount descending and then landing on a wide ledge a few feet up a rock side. It became immediately clear that his dismayed tone had had good reason; a Viking's foot could be seen from behind a rock, only visible because they had spotted it from their higher vantage point. The night fury and his rider climbed quickly and nimbly up, Astrid following on their heels. He vaulted over the rock before her, and as soon as she crested the outcropping, let out a distressed groan.

"Oh no, Sven," she muttered, hauling herself up. "He has three little ones back home."

"He's alive, but not well." Her companion was suddenly all business, calling the dragon to him without words and bringing out aid supplies from one of the surviving saddle pockets. "I think that arm's broken; he must have fallen from there." Astrid looked up at a tight, winding rock path she hadn't seen which led a short-cut to a safer ridge on the other side, and farther away from the monstrous dragon's mountain breach. Poor Sven had been trying to lead everyone to safety faster.

Quickly and efficiently, while she looked at the terrain, the dragon rider had bound the injured arm and splinted it. She stood back to watch him work, and he seemed an old hand at this. "Here, let me help," she offered after a few more moments, and quickly began

checking Sven's legs for more injury while the rider checked his head and chest. "He's bruised, but ok."

"Then we need to bring him to the healer. You did bring one, right?" Was he â€| sarcastic? Really, did he think now was a good time for sarcasm? She scowled at him, unsheathing her axe and twirling it.

"Don't get all fresh, you," she muttered, waving the axe around menacingly before catching the dragon's wary eyes. With a sniff, she holstered her axe again, conceding to herself that perhaps this wasn't the time for that, either. "What do I call you, anyway? I can't just keep saying 'you'"

"Cattongue," he replied, prying his eyes away from her axe and turning back to look at his dragon consideringly.

"If you're going to address me by my clan name, I might as well return the favour," she said. He gave her a long look before shrugging.

"I don't have a clan name," he muttered, turning towards his dragon. She mentally swore at herself; way to bring him to the Hooligan's side! Making him admit he was clanless and shaming him in the process!

"You weren't born into one," she said, quietly giving him an out. He didn't take it.

"No. I wasn't â€| needed, there." He shrugged, still fumbling with his saddle in what she thought was discomfort. In all honestly, she was uncomfortable herself; being thrown out by your clan made you an outcast â€" she was suddenly even more unsure whether he could be trusted. "Ah, finally!" With a few clicks, a hammock gurney suddenly appeared from underneath the dragon, where it had apparently been folded into the saddle. Without another word, he lifted Sven into it, proving that he was stronger than he looked, and mounted back into the saddle carefully.

"You coming?" he asked after a moment, holding his hand out to her. "He doesn't seem to be in danger, but I'm no healer. And we'll have to fly slowly as it is because Toothless will be unbalanced." Looking at him analytically, she took the hand he offered and they lifted off, leaning to one side all the while to try to balance the flight, as he murmured to his dragon reassuringly.

There was something about this evasive man who called himself Cattongue, who led and ordered clan heirs into battle, rode a night fury, but tried to seem unassuming that didn't add up. And Astrid was not a woman who let things lie. If their tribe was going to be in his debt she had to discover what sort of person they had incurred such a deep and long-standing obligation towards, and whether or not he would be honourable about it, or whether Berk had just landed itself in deeper trouble than it had been in when the monstrous dragon breached the mountain.

=0=

**1) The debt Astrid speaks of here is a blood debt in Viking Law. Hiccup has pretty much saved the entire tribe, and now they owe him,

and he can mention any price, because the debt is so big. It will be further explored in the next chapter.**

**2) Jǫrmungandr is sometimes a dragon, sometimes a sea serpent, and it battles Thor during Ragnarǫk and ends the world in the process.
**

~**Next up; count down to the end of the worldâ€|**

A special thanks goes to my Guest reviewers, as I cannot contact them via PM. I would also like to note once again that Becoming is **_complete**_**. Updates occur regularly every Friday because I'm only editing. Suggestions and hints are appreciated, and speculation is part of the fun, however, the story is already written, so please no one get offended if your ideas don't appear. Some of those, however, I would love to **_**read**_**, (I'm looking at you, Bysantian Guard Guest) so please write them, you who have suggested!**

**And to Savvy Guest: Finally someone has looked the word
Lǎ-fǎrasir up on google! But to be honest, I was expecting that, so obviously, it is not the literal meaning. Or maybe it is, and all of the archipelago shall go up in flames, and the only two left will be Gobber and Astrid. How do you know how sadistic I am? *evil grin***

For all those who asked: no, sorry, there will be no love triangle with Hiccup, Astrid and Cami. Frankly I utterly _detest_ the things (love triangles, I mean. I am a refugee from the Inuyasha fandom, after all), and Cami is rather more interested in other ... prey. If you ask me, these other two are the perfect, perfect destructive match.

**And yes; Hiccup is keeping his identity a secret from Berk. How long can that last? You will see...
>

The next update will be Friday February 21st** '14.**

7. End of Days: Day 1

Surprise! Updates will begin to be on Tuesdays and Fridays, because so many of you thought once-a-week was torture. I will possibly have a harder time answering all your reviews, but I hope two updates a week for the next 14 remaining chapters will make up for that.

Without further ado; Welcome. The countdown till the end of the world has begun.

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1_

**Becoming Lǎ-fǎrasir**

* * *

><p>End of Days

Day 1

"WHAT?!"

Gobber jumped, throwing himself on his foot-n-stump at the loud noise and looking blearedly up at the sky, mallet-hand at the ready. But there weren't any dragons â€" attacking dragons, anyway. It was still bizarre to see the Boggy girl trying to annoy the Meathead boy's new wife as they flew, while the sullen UglyThug hovered silently behind, none of their dragons looking to make a meal out of anyone on the ships below. It gave him the willies.

There was still the question of what had awoken him, though; Gobber took his naps where he got them, and after the fight with that beastie and the subsequent fatiguing affair to get everyone on the three remaining long-boats and assorted towed floaties, he didn't appreciate the interruption at all. The answer soon came when he looked towards the last two crazy folk on dragons; the Meathead heir, and the quiet one called Cattongue. An animated discussion seemed to be taking place, and Cattongue had apparently stopped being quiet.

"Why are you saying it now! Why didn't you say something before!" Gobber felt Stoick come up behind him, and he looked back only long enough to nod upwards. His friend narrowed his eyes.

"I didn't think it was important!" Thuggory answered, sounding actually sheepish. This, more than anything else, made Gobber look at the night fury's rider sharply. One simply didn't speak with a Viking Clan Heir like that. Then again, he couldn't disagree; the man was sitting atop the offspring of Thor and Hel. Gobber wouldn't pick a fight with him, either.

"Since when do you know enough about dragons to decide what's up and what's down?" Gobber's eyes widened. Not only at the words; had he been dreaming, or was that pose, with the folded arms and slack shoulders and tilted head, very familiar? Then Thuggory chuckled, and Gobber was confused again. The Meathead heir first acted as if he respected the man, and then didn't look worried at all when he became angry. Feeling Stoick shift uncomfortably behind him, Gobber knew that the Chief had made the same observation; there was entirely too much familiarity between the two young men for it to be a neutral or occasional friendship. Perhaps, he was of the Meathead tribe?

"Hey, why aren't you on Cami's case too? I wasn't the only one who didn't tell you!"

"What is it?!"

Gobber turned to glare at Stoick, who simply ignored the blacksmith and the pain he had just procured to his poor friend's ears by bellowing so close behind him. Cattongue looked down, looked back up at other man with an indiscernible expression due to the helmet, and then angled the big black beast downwards. There wasn't any space for nary another soul on the ship â€" others were actually on the skiffs salvaged from pieces of the other boats and being tugged behind the three whole ones. The black dragon somehow found a way to land, however, by grabbing onto the prow and holding on fast with all four paws, before it hopped onto the prow point and curled up like a giant

cat. Its rider hopped off onto the wooden rim, not a care in the world for the rocking boat and foaming waves beneath, as if he had acquired his dragon's sense of balance by standing next to it.

"I'm sorry if we alarmed you," he began, addressing Stoick as the Chief shouldered his way through the crowded longboat. "But Thuggory just informed me of something that happened while we were circling to look for survivors. The beast came to and retreated, that we know, but apparently before that it breathed some sort of mist onto the boats."

"Tha' it did," Gobber confirmed, making his way laboriously towards them to see and hear more clearly. The people parted for him as he entered the conversation, and Astrid simply used him as a battering ram to navigate the people, slipping behind him as he made his way to the front. "We 'ad to make sure there wasn't any poison in it before we started loading the people and provisions. Why, what's the problem?"

"I can't be sure," he started. Before he could continue, Snotlout cut him off.

"Then why open your mouth?" he said snidely. The rider spared him a glance before he went on.

"Some dragons mark their prey with scent â€" the boulder class dragons, especially, tend to have strong smelling gas secretions from their mouth and â€" other areas." He shrugged. Gobber almost found himself chuckling at the boy's discomfort to talk about farts. "That dragon seemed to be of no species I've ever seen before, but it shares most characteristics with the boulder class â€" the tail, the snout, the armoured skin. It's safe to say that it may also share the scent marking."

"Are you trying to say â€" Astrid asked with dread, squeezing out beside Gobber. The rider nodded.

"I'm afraid so. If I'm right, that dragon was scent marking these ships. And if we take them all the way to Berk, it will follow us there." There was an outburst of dismay and panic.

"What do you suggest we do?" Snotlout said angrily. "Drown ourselves? You're not even sure!"

"I wouldn't go that far," the rider replied with quiet sarcasm, folding his arms. Another chord within Gobber twanged uncomfortably, and he found himself rolling his shoulders. "But the risk is too great to take. There are going to be children and elders on Berk, if that thing makes it there"-

"Guardians ahead!"

Everyone's head whipped around. The two stone guardians, with the braziers in their hewn mouth to signal the entry to the port, were just coming in sight. The rider swerved on the spot, his back going rigid before he cursed. "Throw the anchors! Throw them!" He turned on Stoick, his blazing eyes the only thing his mask showed, but they left no room for argument as he towered over them standing on the boat rim. Some of the tightly packed Vikings fingered their weapons threateningly at the blatant order, and the night fury narrowed its

eyes and growled in response, digging its claws into the longboat's wood. "If that thing follows the ship's scent mark into your port, there will be nothing of Berk left when she's finished," he hissed.

Stoick glared at him, eyes the same vibrant green. Gobber blinked, narrowing his eyes at the two men in front of him.

"Cast the anchor," Stoick finally said. There was a moment of stillness before people began scrambling to move or move aside, getting the heavy iron into the water, and passing the order on to the other two ships.

"It's already a problem, if it's as you say," his Boggie girlie said, and all the people on the boat looked up to see her atop the changewing, which had coiled itself on the boat's mast and was looking lazily around. Gobber's blood-pressure spiked at having a dragon so close, and yet it didn't seem interested in doing anything to any of them. "With those blaze-towers in sight, it will know where to go if it gets to here. We may as well port."

"No! There is another way." The hard green eyes went from the Bog-heir to Stoick and back again. "We may not have killed it, but we damaged its wings. On that, at least, I'm sure. If it comes, it will probably come by sea; swim here. If the fire is put out, and the ships are docked in â€|"

He stopped, rolling his shoulders and turning fully to face Stoick. Gobber resisted the urge to rub his eyes; this was a young man who was used to giving orders and instructions that were obeyed without question. He almost sounded like a village chief. In fact, it was almost like watching Stoick at his age. It was as chilling as it was uncanny; who was this boy no one had heard of, but who behaved like he had real authority?

"Is there an alternate port we can dock in? A place where we can lure it; far enough from the village, but good enough for an ambush?"

And he even thought like a chief. It was getting scary. His skivvies couldn't take very much more.

"There's Troll's Peak beach," Stoick said after a moment's consideration. "But tell me one thing; why should we follow your instruction? Who's to tell us you mean us no harm?"

"Really, Stoick?" the girlie perched on their boat said with a goading voice, "he could have let you get eaten if he meant harm. So my mother's right about you? As stupid as you're vast!"

"How dare you!" Astrid said from beside him, reaching back for her axe.

"Didn't you see anything on that island, don't you see us now?" the other girl replied, still in her relaxed voice as she waved at her dragon. "We wouldn't be like this with our dragons if we didn't listen to him."

"Yes," Stoick said, cutting off Astrid's reply and putting a calming arm on her shoulder. She instantly deferred to him; Gobber almost smiled. The lassie was nothing if not respectful. "That is something

else we will need to speak of. Allied clans don't keep this sort of thing from one another."

"Eh, like you'd have listened," was her unconcerned reply. That blonde girlie was beginning to get on Gobber's nerves too, but he admitted he could see her point. "_And_ you'd a' done the same, anyway." Also true.

"The point remains," Astrid insisted, looking back to the boy, "whether or not to listen to him."

"What do you have to lose?" the night fury rider replied impatiently, reaching a hand out to pet the beast as it growled at Snotlout for getting too close. "You'll walk a bit more, granted, and the injured will travel for an extra half hour. But you won't alarm the town folk by appearing in only three ships, and with this escort." He gestured towards himself and the others atop dragons. "You'll have time to tell them, although preferably, only one person should go into the village." He stopped again, folding his arms and looking at the deck pensively. "We don't know how strong the scent mark is, and it may possibly be best for everyone to burn their clothing before approaching the village proper. The less traces of the scent we have, the better for the safety of the village."

"Like hell!" Snotlout replied, puffing his chest out. "I'm not going around naked just because you tell me to!"

"Yeah," Tuffnut said riotously, "he only does that when it rains!"

"Or you could _bathe_," the Bog-girlie piped in again. "Lord knows you _need_ it."

"Cami," the night fury rider said warningly, to which she sighed and raised her arms in defeat. "She makes a valid point, though. Bathing with our clothes and all could potentially resolve the problem."

"And I'd seriously consider it," Thuggory butted in from the water. The Viking was standing on his thunderdrum, who had apparently grown bored of flapping in circles and was now happily floating on the ocean's surface. "No one knows as much on dragons as Cat tongue does. He helped us a great deal on Freezing, and there hasn't been a dragon I haven't seen him deal with, one way or another. With us, it's usually what he says goes when we have a major pickle with the reptiles."

And _that_ explained a lot. Gobber looked at Stoick. Astrid beside him looked uncomfortable with the notion, but he supposed it was the youth and pride in her thinking, as Snotlout's puce coloured face demonstrated much more clearly. The old blacksmith knew his friend well, however, and could as much predict what he was going to say as he would have if he been able to see the cogs in his head working. He could tell that Stoick actually liked the idea a great deal; it was damage control in case the boy's suspicions were true, at the cost of only a few extra miles, and it was also a way to check the trustworthiness of this boy before they arrived in the village. After all, he had just saved Berk. That usually came at a price.

"Very well," Stoick finally said, ignoring the protest of both Astrid

and his nephew. "Head to Troll's Peak beach! Sven is our most gravely injured. We'll see to him and the others first, then proceed to the village in turns. There's a lake on the way that will help get rid of whatever you think we could take with us to our homes."

The boy nodded. "Once we're there, we should start seeing to a proper welcome party for that thing, if- when it decides to drop by."

"Ye seem pretty sure we're going to get a visit," Gobber spoke up at last, looking at the young man shrewdly. He merely nodded, hopping back onto the night fury and pushing into the air.

"I hope I'm wrong, but I'm afraid that based on what I know, it's not likely!" And then he was off again, the changewing leaving its mast and the thunderdrum its water, seemingly eager to follow the smaller dragon.

"Arrogant prat," Snotlout hissed.

"Not quite," Gobber replied, looking after them. Stoick, standing beside him, was quiet, and the blacksmith knew he was probably thinking the same thing; there hadn't been a single ounce of arrogance in that boy's voice and attitude. Everything he said seemed to stem from the quiet certitude he exuded. And if he really was all he appeared to be, their prospects were grim.

=0=

Fishlegs really did enjoy telling this part of the tale to his children, later. Considering that his wife had been unable to accompany him to the fight, as she gave birth a few days before their departure, he rather enjoyed having bragging rights to that part, and his son and daughter, sitting on each knee, demanded it almost every Winter's night for as long as they could get away with it.

The warrior's return to Berk had been something people would speak of later as if the returning Hooligans were draugrs from Hel's realm. Where everyone had been looking at the sea, waiting forever trepidously for their brave men and women to return, no one had expected them to march in, sopping wet, with the last dying rays of the sun casting them in sinister light as they exited the forest.

Once it was settled that no, they were not dead returning to haunt the living, however, the cry had risen and all of Berk reversed out of their houses to embrace their loved ones.

The meeting in the Great Hall that followed had a different chorus altogether. When Stoick had begun telling the rest of Berk what had happened and what they had seen, those few who had not been on the boats murmured endlessly in disbelief before the sombre faces of their friends and relatives quieted them down. Most of them.

"Are you trying to tell me, Stoick," Mildew the Unpleasant said in his nasal voice, "that you expect us to believe some foreign boy, riding a dragon â€" a night fury no less â€" came to your rescue, leading the heirs to the other tribes, and succeeded where catapults and war hammers did not? It's a ridiculous story, even for children!"

"If you do not believe me, Mildew, ask any of the brave warriors who were with me. It is only thanks to the dragon riders that our only injured were few and even those healable. Everyone who was on that island can attest to that."

"Of course they would," Mildew said condescendingly, leaning on his staff. "You are their chief."

Stoick slammed his fist on the table. "That is codswallop, and you know it. All the people in this tribe are free to talk, and say whatever they like. I do not run that kind of village; you should know." He pointed at Mildew. "Your tongue would have been the first one to go."

Most of the village tittered, and some of the warriors turned towards him with grim smiles. Mildew was not deterred. "And where are they now, then, these heroes!"

"In the forest," Stoick replied simply. Another explosion of words and whispers erupted, washing over the Hall's columns, walls and high ceiling. Fishlegs shifted uneasily. "The rider of the night fury thought it best that we should inform you all before the dragons they have with them walk among you. He is with the ships, and awaits word."

"And I say we send him off with torches and spears!" Mildew replied, shaking his staff noisily. Some murmurs and some shifts of discomfort indicated that not everyone disagreed with the malodorous old man. "What's to say that they won't kill us in our sleep! Friendly, dragons, why I"-

A loud, reverberating thud cut his speech short as well as the hall table. Astrid's axe was embedded into it almost to the handle, and her eyes were shining beadily.

"He saved us. All of us. Berk owes him a debt." There was an instant hush, and even Mildew desisted, looking away rebelliously but dropping his argument. Honour was not something to be taken lightly. Without taking her eyes off Mildew (or even blinking, Fishlegs swore every time he recounted the tale), she held out her hand in his own direction. Extricating himself from Ruffnut, who had gripped his arm hard between her post pregnancy fatigue and the thrill of the tale she'd just heard, Fishlegs reached across his back and pulled the package he had strapped there, handing it over, and Astrid quickly unravelled it. Fishlegs had picked it from the battlefield for his own study, but Astrid had very quickly and shrewdly seen it as excellent proof of what they had seen, he was sure. There were gasps, someone even cried out to Thor, as she threw the gigantic tooth down next to her axe.

"And this is part of a tooth they melted out of its mouth. It was twice this size," she said, pulling the axe out of the table and holstering it. "Between them, they have a changewing, thunderdrum, gronkle, nadder and night fury. They were well organised, they fought strongly; they had strategy and used all their assets. But they didn't take it down. None of the weapons and machines we had made a difference, but they could at least damage it." She took a deep breath, looking towards Stoick, and - Fishlegs saw him nod. "The least we could do is listen to them; if we did it once for every man and woman who were saved on that island, it would still not be

enough."

"And what are they asking for, in payment!" someone asked from the back of the crowd.

"They have asked for nothing, yet." Stoick replied. "But considering that all the others are heirs of allied clans, we can probably negotiate something when this is all over. The night fury rider has not mentioned terms yet. We will need to cross that bridge when we reach it; the debt is already incurred."

Fishlegs always laughed when he told his children that part. As they grew older, of course, so did they. The gods truly had plans for their heroes; so Hiccup Haddock too.

=0=

Thuggory was sweating buckets. Dogsbreath heard him warn Cattongue; he'd said it again and again; HE was the one the people of Berk wanted to see, he and the trice damned night fury, but _noooo_, first he went and _saved_ the Thor blasted village of Vikings, then he decided that he wanted them not to like him, so he had stayed behind. No amount of persuasion, yelling or dragging had worked. Dogsbreath could still hear Thuggory's ranting in his ears as the other heir squirmed under Stoick's scrutiny.

And of course, Thuggory had been right. And of course, Berk had wanted most of all to meet the night fury rider. The hall was filled with murmurs and uncomfortable shuffling as the villagers debated with one another whether or not they should be insulted or worried.

"He is uncomfortable with crowds," Thuggory was trying to explain nervously. "And while we left the dragons at the edge of the village, the night fury won't do that. Toothless's protective of him, and won't let him get out of his sight; he didn't want to make the village uncomfortable."

"Be that as it may," Stoick replied, chest puffed out. "You said yourself that he is the one who the Meatheads follow on dragons. He is to be here."

Dogsbreath observed all this silently, resting against one of the columns as he stood with Heather and the blonde woman from the Hooligan tribe behind the two arguing men. Cami had been sent to bring the stubborn Cattongue here, as she was the only one capable of doing so.

"Why did he not come into Berk?" the blonde Hooligan asked in a low voice, seemingly to no one in particular. She was looking around the hall, her brow creased with worry, her arms folded tightly against her chest. Dogsbreath exchanged a look with Heather at this; obviously, the Hooligan woman had her own reservations about their friend, and his behaviour must have justified them further.

Almost as if to answer her, the doors of the hall opened, and Cami strutted in. She was followed by Cattongue, who Dogsbreath immediately realised was more than a little reluctant from his stiff stride and rigid shoulders. And just as Thuggory had predicted, Toothless had not consented to being left behind. Like a stalking

shadow, the black dragon walked right behind his rider, head swerving in all directions at the cries of alarm given by the Hooligans. Cattongue stopped, bending down to rub the dragon's head and soothe it in the way that was unique to him; he had a gift with the animals that even those under his training had yet to achieve. Dogsbreath suspected they never would.

After a few more moments, Cattongue moved forward, a much calmer night fury still close at his heels. The people parted quickly before him as if he were either a god or diseased. Dogsbreath tilted his head; the contrast tickled his intellect. From the gronkle rider's point of view, the set shoulders, armour and helmet made Cattongue forbidding and intimidating; he could understand the Hooligans, and was interested to see how it would all pan out.

"Look who's finally showed up," the blonde said confrontationally. Dogsbreath blinked at her, and then suppressed a smirk. Smart; she must have already taken Cattongue's measure and seen that he was not prone to violence first and words later, so she was testing him, to see how far he took words before the violence came out to play. She was on her home-ground now, so this is where it was safest for her to do so.

"Someone was needed to remain with the dragons. I volunteered because I am not familiar with â€| this, and am familiar with dragons." Diplomatic and polite, as usual.

"And what is _this_," she replied, waving a hand to all of them. Cattongue suppressed a flinch, Dogsbreath noted with interest.

"I am a stranger to you, but my friends are not. The dragons are comfortable with me. It just seemed like the more sensible solution," he said calmly again. Dogsbreath felt there was something strange about Cattongue's demeanour and voice, but he couldn't quite put his hand on it. Still, he had to applaud the way he skirted her question. The Hooligan woman could learn from him, if she holstered her axe long enough. She seemed about to retort before her chief intervened.

"Peace," he told her quietly. "I understand," he went on, addressing Cattongue, "that in the other tribes you have visited, you have taught them what you know about dragons. Thuggory has been telling me that you are well respected on Freezing to Death."

"I â€| yes." Cattongue seemed immensely uncomfortable. "If he says so." Sometimes, Dogsbreath thought he was too modest. If he didn't know that he became a different person in a smithy and on the battlefield, Dogsbreath wouldn't have believed he was a true Viking.

"I would ask you why you have not yet visited Berk, but under the circumstances of our meeting, I would much rather like to know why you have helped us, when as you say, we are strangers to you. Thuggory assures me that the intervention you young ones mounted was all your initiative." Cattongue's head swerved towards Thuggory; Dogsbreath bemoaned the fact that he wasn't at the right angle to see his friend's eyes through his helmet. "We owe you a debt of gratitude. Please, name a reward you wish of Berk and it will be granted."

Now Cattongue was really uncomfortable. Dogsbreath almost sniggered; the man was ill-at-ease when his smithing talents were praised, which were considerable and ingenious in their own right. This amount of attention had to be driving him mad. And Cattongue did not disappoint, as he raised a hand to his helmet ineffectually, before letting it drop on the night fury's head.

"I would rather discuss the more urgent matter, if we are to speak about one," he replied, his tone worried and anxious.

"What other ?"

"The possible return of the queen dragon." Cattongue straightened, his demeanour returning once again to the one Dogsbreath admired in battle. "I was not joking when I said there was a danger from her."

"I see." The head of the Hooligan tribe was obviously not used to being contradicted, probably never had been by someone Cattongue's age and size. Still, he knew his diplomacy well, as he invited Cattongue to continue. The younger man looked around himself.

"Should it only be the war council, perhaps?"

The suggestion seemed to send a hush over the whole hall, before a nasal wailing voice rose up in protest.

"What is this!" A thin, foul-smelling old man came forward waving his staff. "This man, this foreigner to Berk, comes here and summons our war council? After walking in here with a night fury, no less! Who does he think he is!"

"Mildew!" Stoick barked, but some of the people who had been shifting uncomfortably before were looking like they were about to join the old man's voice in the choir. Emboldened by this, the smelly elder went on.

"Tell us; who do you think you are? Debt or not, why should we listen to you, boy, when you're nothing but an unnatural dragon lover?"

Toothless started growling, and this time, Cattongue did not calm his dragon. Dogsbreath stopped leaning on the column, straightening to look at the other man better. This was interesting the old man had managed to do what Dogsbreath had very rarely seen. He'd made Cattongue angry.

"Ooh, shouldn'a done that," Cami whispered at his elbow, where she'd joined their group to, apparently, get front row seats of the show. The blonde Hooligan woman turned to look at them all shrewdly, if worriedly, before tensing and turning back to the scene. Heather and Thuggory seemed about to intervene but they didn't get the chance.

"I do not think I am anyone. I only asked your chief to call a war council because in all the villages I have been, matters of this importance are usually discussed by the village leaders and elders before they are brought to the rest of the people. Some things are unnecessarily alarming, and there are children here," he said coldly,

standing at his full height so that he towered over the bowed man. Some jitters in the crowd were silenced as he turned stonily toward the Hooligan chief. "You have said that you owe me a debt. Very well, here is my price; in matters of dragons, and especially in the matter of the possible danger we discussed on the way here, I will help you, and you will do everything I tell you to. I will need the forge, the carpenters, and I would like to train a number of your own to properly deal with dragons, so both sides can reduced the number of casualties and so that the village can be ready for any danger. I would appreciate if you could let me know when you are ready to refuse or accept this price, and should you accept I will wait for you to let me know when it is convenient for you to summon your council."

Dogsbreath would have laughed if it had not been inappropriate for the moment. Cami beside him had a grin as wide as her face would stretch. The Hooligan woman looked like she'd been forced to swallow the bitterest ale.

"We can hardly refuse," Stoick replied stiffly. Cattongue's anger seemed to abate slightly, and he finally placated his dragon, stopping the subsonic growl that had been setting everyone's teeth on edge. Nodding towards Stoick in acceptance of his decision, Cattongue turned towards the door.

"Then please, let me know when the village council would like to speak with me. I will be awaiting in the forest â€" Thuggory knows where the other dragons are."

"Cattongue, wait!"

Cattongue jumped and turned, looking at the blonde Hooligan woman. "You didn't answer the chief's first question. _Why did you help us_?"

This woman wasn't as dull as he thought she was; she wasn't just smart â€" crass and brutal, yes, like any Viking, but it hid a very sharp intellect, and Dogsbreath was surprised at himself for not noticing how far it went beforehand. That she'd asked this question, after Cattongue's peculiar demands for a price, showed clearly enough that he should have seen better signs.

"Because it was the right thing to do."

Cattongue all but fled after looking at her for a moment longer, leaving a Hall in an uproar of questions and displeased voices. Most, he was pleased to see had turned on the old man for provoking the anger of someone they were indebted to, landing them in a very strange place; Cattongue had after all just made himself both a servant but also _de facto_ leader of this tribe for the foreseeable future where the dragons were concerned. And as this was Berk, almost _everything_ concerned dragons. Had he wanted to take Berk for his own, he couldn't have done it in a more subtle, non-violent and indisputable way. It was a pity that Dogsbreath knew Cattongue had no intention of taking over the Hooligan tribe. It would have been interesting to watch.

Stoick turned to Thuggory.

"How trustworthy did you say he was?" the large man said in a

neutral, flat voice. Thuggory gulped, and he had good reason to, since he'd just been tacitly made the guarantor of Cattongue's good behaviour.

=0=

1 Troll Peak is a tribute to Troll Valley, and consequently to one of the best stories I have read in this fandom, When in Rome. I suggest that anyone who has not yet read it should definitely give it a go, after reading Talking in her Sleep, the first story of that continuity. It has some mature content, but is otherwise an invaluable addition to this fandom.

****Cultural Notes:****

****1)** Some aspects of Viking law will be used, again with some authorial license. However, a blood oath/debt was something taken very, very seriously, and was incurred when a life was saved ********from certain death ********by intervention of another. In this case, Hiccup " or Cattongue " has saved all of Berk, so their debt is enormous. He could, conceivably, ask to have anything, from all the land of the island to all the animals they herd, and Berk would not be able to refuse. What Mildew is proposing here is tantamount to treason, as it would make the Hooligans look dishonourable in the eyes of all their allied clans; only the Outcasts do not follow Viking law.******

****This update took place on February 18th 2014. Next update will be Friday February 21st 2014.****

8. Day 2

****Work begins among the Hooligans to make sure the Red Death receives the proper reception " all on Cattongue's orders.****

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1</p>

**Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir**

* * *

><p>Day 2</p>

"_Aaah!_"

It was normal to hear war-cries and the ringing of metal coming from the dragon arena, so no passers-by would have given it a second glance. The only thing that was different today, in fact, was that the participants of the all-out brawl were not all from the same village.

They were waiting for Cattongue, and Cami had gotten bored. The men were off to the side, the fat blond kid booking bets about axe-throwing accuracy. Pussies. Cami had tackled the girl twin to the ground, and the rest was history. Heather and other Berk girl had tried to stop them, but it had ended up being a four-way fight, all-out match.

"Hate to admit it, but you're good," she told the shorter blonde woman with no helmet. The girl twin " 'nut something " saw an opening and charged, taking Cami down with a waist tackle and then getting flipped on her stomach. Throwing her off was not as easy as she thought, and by the time she had the other blonde in a headlock, Heather was going at the other " Astrid? Some stupid name like that.

"Your friend is toast," Nut-girl said in a croaky gloat, still in the headlock. Cami twisted the other girl's spine backwards. "Ow, ow, ow" yeah, do that again!"

Cami blinked. Then smirked. "Ha! I knew there was a reason why our villages were allies!"

"Same here. You're almost as good as my brother at this. But don't tell him that."

"Almost?" Cami narrowed her eyes, but battle cries interrupted her choke-a-tete with her new buddy as Heather and Astrid went at each other, axes raised, and crossed blades. Their axe-heads got stuck, and neither one of them would budge, turning the mock fight into a very real tug of war.

"There is NO way you're winning this, Mrs Married Woman," Astrid taunted, squaring her feet and pulling. Heather almost came off the ground, but then she braced and tugged herself. "I've been training with an axe since I was five, and this axe was made by the best smith on Berk!"

"Oh yeah?" Cami started cheering Heather on. Nut-girl underneath her started cheering Astrid. Cami was suddenly tackled from behind and ended up in a tangle of limbs between the two twins; but in the end she was the one holding both of their heads down. "Well, this is my wedding axe, Ms single girl, and it was made by the best smith in the archipelago! Let's see how your handle holds!"

"That's my line!"

Both girls twisted at the same time, and there was a teeth-clenching screeching noise as they came apart, panting, flushed and grinning; then both girls looked at their axes and yelped in dismay. Each axe had hewn a long curl of wood out of the other's handle, and a metal core was exposed underneath.

"Heather!" Thuggory said, looking annoyed as he came up, "Wife, that axe is three days old!" He unholstered his own and held it up like a baby. "They're not a matching set anymore! The marriage is ruined!" Cami and both the twins she was sitting on burst out laughing. The man could be such a sentimental idiot sometimes.

"Odin, he's stupid," the boy twin said, slightly slurred as his mouth was mooshed under her shoe. "What's the point of a weapon if it doesn't have a good dent or scar here and there."

"I totally concur," Cami snickered. He looked at her in confusion.

"It means she agrees!" Nut-girl grunted, head pulled back as Cami

held her hair like reigns. "Gods you boys are all stupid." Cami beamed. "Glad I married the intelligent one." Darn, she was already saddled with a man. Ung, they could be so annoying at times, these men; she'd even gotten a yelling at by Gobber earlier for frightening his skivvies off with her changewing when she'd been visiting the forge earlier. Poor Berk woman had so much potential. Well...

"Hey, ever thought of moving to Bog?"

"Hello, everyone. Sorry I'm late, but I had to goâ€¦"
erâ€¦"

Cattongue had finally arrived, and he was looking at them all from atop Toothless, his body language hesitant. The stupid boy had decided to refuse to remove his helmet, giving some bogus excuse that he was hideously scarred and was uncomfortable without it (which had started Snot-man's quips about ugliness, which had instantly made him Cami's favourite verbal-barb-target). It was highly inconvenient, because Cami adored making Hiccup â€" pardon â€" Cattongue uncomfortable, and now she couldn't enjoy watching his face twist into the oddest shapes when she flirted and nagged at him.

Any other conversation was cut off when a gronkle with no tack or saddle buzzed into the ring, roosting next to Toothless. The two dragons greeted each other with a head-nudge, and all the Hooligans stiffened. Cattongue got off the night fury, and he was suddenly all business. _Oh yes! _Real show was about to start.

"Ok," he started. "I'd like everyone with a dragon on one side, and everyone without on the other." Cami got off the twins and headed to the right, where Heather and Thuggory were standing beside Fanghorn and Clover. Dogsbreath nudged the fat man when he looked like he was too lost taking notes around Farthog, and Cami snickered as the twins _rolled_ their way there in a wrestling match. Cattongue probably looked exasperated under that mask. She _liked_ them.

"What dragons do you have in the holding pens?" Cattongue asked the blond man who was still taking notes and rubbing his stubbly beard, evidently deciding to ignore the wrestling twins. The man jumped at being addressed, but rattled off a nightmare, a zippleback and a nadder who apparently had become efficient in the art of escaping, and sometimes taking others with her.

"It's the tenth time we've caught this one in the last five years," he said. "It almost seems to do it on purpose. If you ask me, it turned the whole escaping thing into a game."

"Or maybe it's escaping from something else, on its island."

"What..? Ohâ€¦"

"We'll start with the nadder then. Escape artist or not, it's the least destructive of the ones you have." He walked by Snot-face, who had resolutely refused to go with the other Hooligans and stood in the middle, defiantly folding his arms and pointing his jaw at Hicc-Cattongue. Idiot; he hadn't realised yet that Cattongue had made ignoring stupid people a Thawfest sport. "Heather, can you line up with your dragon, please? Toothless, come here." It always amazed Cami how the most terrifying of the dragons obeyed Hiccup like a

faithful hound. Cattongue. Oh, _whatever!_

Hiccup walked up to the pen he was told contained the nadder and released it, getting out of the way of a few spikes before Toothless growled menacingly at it, giving Hiccup an opening to begin working his magic. He removed the dagger he always carried on his wrist, giving it to Toothless who carried it to a corner and returned beside his rider. Next he called Heather, who brought Clover, and the two nadders began squawking at each other, opening and closing their wings, raising and lowering their heads as if they were doing an elaborate greeting dance. Oh wait, they were; Hiccup told them that last time.

Finally, when the two dragons had stopped bowing and wing-waving, Hiccup approached Clover, offering a hand and letting him nuzzle it. After a few moments, he approached the blue nadder, more slowly, and let it take its time before it hesitantly approached him, and even more hesitantly placed its nose next to Hiccup's palm. The moment it finally allowed itself to touch him, he began to scratch it tenderly.

"Frigga, you're a beautiful one," he said, and the thing preened and gargled happily. Turning to look at the rest of them (and she winked at him, just to make him uncomfortable), he gestured to Astrid and Toothless, one coming next to him much faster than the other. "Ok, girl," he continued, addressing the nadder, "I want you to meet some people. This is Toothless. He is my dragon companion, and he allows me to fly with him."

Toothless gave a grunt, and allowed himself to get sniffed by the curious blue dragon, who gargled at him too.

"Hofferson, grab a fish and move five feet behind her, please. Now, girl, there's someone else I'd like you to meet. Toothless and I enjoy flying together, and Clover over there is taken care of by Heather. Look at how well groomed he is, and how shiny his scales are. Would you like a rider of your own?" The dragon seemed to consider it, twisting its head to look at Hiccup first with one eye and then the other. Cami was beginning to understand why her friend the toothpick had asked her to leave the changewing in the forest; Sting would have been roaringly bored by now, and started creating mischief. Like the wrestling twinsâ€¦

"Hofferson," Hiccup said again, catching Cami's attention. Aah, smart boy. Trying to keep a distance with her, was he? Pity it was useless, Cami knew; the sentimental idiot. "Approach her from the back." Astrid protested. Hiccup insisted; they went round in circles for a few moments until Hiccup asked her to simply move two steps forward. In the end, she managed to smooth the nadder's spines down and feed it.

It was all _soooo veeery exciiiiiiiting_! Like watching grass grow.

"Heather, can you take Hofferson to the glade with Clover and her new friend, please? Cami," _oh yes!_ Something to do! "Take the twins there too. I want to get them familiar with a dragon before I introduce them to their own." _Score!_ This was going to be fun. "Give them all some long-grass, ok? And make sure Clover stops our pretty blue one here from making a break for it."

The dragon thrilled. Hiccup was an idiot; that dragon wasn't going anywhere, it was half in love with him already, like nearly all the women on Freezing and half the ones on Bog â€" though they'd never admit it, crusty warriors that they were. And oh-ho! So was a certain blonde!

Well ok, she was looking at him funny, like she couldn't decide whether he was mad, or a genius, or a mad genius; or whether he'd grown another head. But she was looking. The stupid Snot-man was still standing in the middle of the arena defiantly, occasionally passing a bad joke everyone was too busy to take notice of. He seemed about to latch onto blonde axe-woman, but she walked away from him briskly and Hiccup continued.

"Thug, you're staying. You too, please." The blond boy â€" Fishgills? Fishlungs? - had been measuring the wingspan of Hiccup's gronkle and comparing it to Farthog, so he nodded absently. "I'll really need you guys here. Jorgensen volunteered to get the nightmare."

Cami laughed all the way to the glade, and the twins, never mind them being from the same village, were making Fried-Snot jokes and screams-like-a-sissy jokes all through the hike there. Cami was seriously considering adopting these two.

=0=

There was something disturbing, and yet altogether too familiar, about sharing space in the smithy again. Gobber had ditched his shirt a while ago because the inside was a furnace, never mind the storm raging outside, and he couldn't understand how that boy hadn't ditched his mask yet as he banged at his portion of the metal dome they were constructing.

Trying to be surreptitious, Gobber angled himself so he could see the young man he was working with through the reflection on some shields. He'd shed the majority of his armour â€" it made Gobber wonder whether he was trusting, or crafty, because he'd kept just enough on to be protected â€" and even opened his tunic at the front half-way. It was like no tunic Gobber had ever seen â€" it had buckles all the way down its front, was sleeveless, and short around his waist.

The beast was in there with them, too. It was snoozing at the boy's feet, like a giant hound from Loki's own kennel. And yet it hadn't once been aggressive towards the old blacksmith â€" it'd growled at him once before being sharply called back by the boy. Something about him, and the air he had when he was around the beasts, simply left Gobber rubbing his stubbly chin.

He was a slip of a man, hardly one at all, even though he was taller than the one-legged, one-handed blacksmith. He didn't take to crowds well at all, if what he'd seen in the Hall was any indication, and only slapped back if you pinched too hard. But there was something about him, something that had shivers running up and down Gobber's spine. Possibly, it was the fact that he seemed to be able to tame and command any one of these scaly mongrels, and they were all running after his heels like pups within a few hours of being scratched and murmured a few words; he controlled the beasts almost like Odin had given him right over them. He could raise an army of them and have the whole archipelago to himself within months if he so

wished, and instead, he went around helping people.

Pounding away now, one wouldn't think twice about the lad, if you didn't look at the odd helmet on his head â€" which was one Hel of a work of craftsmanship, he would admit â€" and the shadowy dragon at his feet. He seemed like an ordinary smith, down on the anvil with all his strength and disregarding the rest of the world.

But no, there were too many contradictions. The helmet and the dragon already couldn't be ignored; then there was the armour, which was so complicated it looked like something out of an old saga. The clothes were off too â€" some were honest to Thor Viking furs, the rest seemed a patchwork of weirdness.

Gobber shook his head â€" it was just useless to try to decipher this lad by looking at him. He looked like Loki, in disguise. Odin got his mighty steed from that â€" but an untold amount of mischief also got had, so this could go either way.

They were silent for a while more as Gobber got re-absorbed in his task of making half the metal dome. It was made of a shining, lightweight metal that the Meathead heir swore by up and down was the best thing since roasted yak meat. Why they were making this strange semi-circular shaped thing out of it (and where the lad had procured it) Gobber didn't know. Truly, though, he was enjoying the work, something new to do and learn in the profession he'd known since he was a wee lad, and that he'd taught to another wee lad â€"

No, that way lay a sleepless night and an unhealthy amount of mead.

His hammar hand gave a last ringing hit on the cooling metal before he saw that he needed to bend the rim a little. Perhaps it was his recent thoughts, perhaps he had just forgotten himself with someone else in the smithy. As it was, he held out his arm and asked for the pincers â€" which were promptly given to him from the rack of interchangeable hands.

Gobber blinked at them resting on his flesh hand, then up at the lad. He'd not stopped hammering at all, the much smaller mallet doing the work strongly yet precisely on his half of the dome. Gobber admitted that it was neater, finer work than his own, and for a moment envied his master for having made such a smart smith, before a shiver of cold when up his spine again.

It was an odd feeling, as he'd felt on the boat on the way here while the boy spoke to Stoick and the lass, but he still couldn't put his finger on it. Gobber looked for a moment at the strong shoulders and slim but powerful muscles, tapered with nimble but calloused fingers directing the small mallet just so, before he shook his head and got back to work. He couldn't let himself be shown up by this foreign smith after all. He'd survived losing a hand and a foot; he really wasn't sure he'd survive losing his job.

=0=

It took Astrid all day to get to the forge. Her new 'friend', a rather overly-enthusiastic nadder who had obsessively tried to groom her hair all afternoon, had kept her in the woods through the waning hours of light; a good sign, according to Heather. A bother and

unwelcome adrenaline jump every few seconds, according to her.

In fact, the beast was still following her, despite the weather. It was winding through the wide, thankfully near-empty streets of Berk behind her, attempting to be stealthy about it. The odd upturned basket and support beam whipped by the colourful tail was giving it away.

She stopped as she approached the forge, and felt the nadder's light footsteps stop behind her. It was strangely comforting â€" almost like the dragon had her back â€" while at the same time set the fine hairs on her neck standing stiff as boards. Astrid almost felt like she had trained a shark to help guard her while she swam.

She took a moment to steel herself, because the nadder was not the only reason she was on edge. There was something odd about that man, something that simply did not add up, and Astrid was not about to leave a stone unturned. She was also not comfortable with him being in the smithy while she spoke to Gobber about what she'd come for.

She rolled her shoulders and walked around the forge's open wall. The two men were still there; Gobber was clanging away at what looked like half a massive bath, while Cattongue worked on a number of small, circular objects, his portion of whatever Gobber was doing lying upright against the wall. As soon as she walked in, the dragon's head rose, eyes trained on her. Then it looked behind her, gave a huff and put its big black head back down.

"You have a new shadow. A rather colourful one," Gobber jibed while nodding his head behind her, and with more good humour than Astrid had seen in a while. The nadder had 'hidden' behind a nearby house, and was occasionally peeking at her before ducking its still-visible head behind the chimney. A number of startled Vikings were looking at the normally aggressive creature behaving like a child in utter confusion.

"I hadn't noticed," she answered in the same light tone. Then she reluctantly brought the axe out with a side glance to the other smith banging at his own, seemingly imported anvil. "Look, Gobber, I know you're busy, but I really need you to look at this for me."

"Ah, lass," he said disapprovingly, and she ducked her head. A gurgle from the dragon behind her alerted her that the creature had decided to disapprove of Gobber's disapproval. "Takin' a liking to you, it has! Well then..." He hefted the weapon, twirling it in his grip and shining the blade. "Lass, you know I can't fix this."

A sinking feeling dragged everything to the bottom of her belly.

"Gobber, you're the best smith on Berk, you _taught _him. Please take another look." Gobber gave her a pitying glance, and she felt herself flush when she felt Cattongue's eyes on her as well. For some incongruous reason, when Gobber gave her the axe back with a shake of the head, Astrid held it to herself and tried to cover most of it from his prying eyes.

"I can't work that handle, lass, too much finagling for my old fingers. Never did have fingers as nimble as that boy's own, anyway.

Only thing I can do for you is fix that wood with some metal, or try to stick it back with tree sap, but it'd be unbalanced, and you know that. I warned you last time when you chipped the blade that there was only so much I could do on it."

She nodded, feeling despondent. She'd managed to ruin Hiccup's axe, and since he wasn't around to fix it, she would have to put the damaged, though still beautiful, weapon on the wall for good.

"He did warn to check the third axel. It's always the protective ring that comes off."

A loud clang. The black dragon's head shot out of its doze, and he snorted in alarm. Astrid and Gobber turned towards the guest smith, weapons ready, to find him staring wide-eyed at Astrid herself, hammer having missed his target completely to clang loudly against the anvil.

"What is it?" she hissed, lowering her weapon when she saw the dragon eying it. She didn't want it charred, too. The nadder came up behind her cautiously, and sniffed her as she put the weapon away. Thinking it best not to agitate a ten-foot toothed creature in the middle of the village, she cautiously began scratching its chin.

Cattongue's eyes moved from her to the now-blissful nadder, a sight she still found hard to believe, but that did not distract her enough from the startled look he'd given her. She couldn't understand the shock there had been there for a moment, and wished, not for the first time, that he'd remove the damn helmet so she could see what the rest of his face gave away, scars or no scars.

"Nothing, sorry. Just missed."

Astrid didn't buy that for one second. She opened her mouth to retort, but the nadder nuzzled her more strongly, as if sensing her unease. Was it possible? She just scratched the creature under the chin harder, and it gave a soothing rumble. Then the rain began again, and the nadder extended a wing over her, keeping her dry.

Astrid looked up at it open-mouthed. The dragon merely nuzzled her, as if waiting for approval. Gobber was wearing her same gobsmacked expression, she was sure. Cattongue, on the other hand, had a crinkle in his eyes that told her he was smiling, and the black night fury beside him was giving an equivalently silly look, a stupid grin with his tongue hanging out between his gums-

Gums?

"No teeth?" she said before she could stop herself, and her nadder grumbled slightly at not having all the attention. Astrid simply rubbed her behind the spike ridge, as she seemed to enjoy that. Cattongue seemed to be enjoying the situation, too.

"I told you it was a tradition. Show her, Toothless." And the night fury opened its mouth wide before its teeth came out sharply, and then snapped in again. Astrid exchanged a blinking glance with Gobber and resisted the urge to ask it to do it again. Cattongue seemed to read her mind; he gave his dragon a nudge, which caused the night fury to show off its teeth again, but not before rolling its eyes and

whacking its rider with its tail. "Ow! Hey, watch the tail fin, stupid reptile!" The dragon snorted at him. The nadder beside her gurgled out what was almost a laugh.

Astrid found herself feeling as if she was in an unfamiliar home - everything around her was Berk, and yet at the same time, not. The dragons she had fought and trained against all her life had personalities similar to men and women; a deadly nadder was currently re-aligning her fur and spiked skirt gently with her teeth before rubbing her nose against Astrid's shoulder. A night fury, the deadliest of dragons, was playing a game of tug-the-rag with Cattongue, who was laughing and gamely trying not to fly off his feet. She looked at Gobber again and she was sure she saw, apart from the slack-jaw, a shadow of pain in his eyes. She made up her mind to pass by later so that she could make sure he was doing well; it must not be easy on him, to have someone else in the smithy with him again.

Her eyes moved sharply to the hook - the small leather apron was still hanging there, thankfully. It was a good thing; hero or not, debt or not, Cattongue's head would have rolled if he'd touched it.

With a sigh, she stepped out into the rain - or she would have, if her dragon hadn't kept a wing over her. Astrid couldn't help smiling and petting the nadder once again. The feeling was dizzying; they were still in Berk - the houses and desolate weather said so - but a nadder was keeping her warm and dry, a night fury was playing and smirking, and the smithy was a bright place to go again. It was like she had woken up in the morning and found everything in her room moved just by two fingers' width to the right.

"Hoy, my brother!" Thuggory said as he passed her and he stepped into the smithy, shaking water drops and making the night fury grumble. Astrid paused; Thuggory had just addressed Cattongue as his brother? That was some familiarity! She moved back towards the smithy, the nadder somehow managing to stay quiet and keep her dry. "I've brought you the missus' axe. She was mighty upset. That Astrid did a number on it!" Pride welled; at least, her beautiful axe had taken a victim - one of almost equal craftsmanship to her own, she had noticed. In fact, that handle had been almost identical to hers.

A shiver of doubt ran up her stomach.

"Hm â€¦ Thug, you know I have to make all the defence weapons. And axes aren't my speciality. And that I â€¦ didn't make you that axe. I worked with him, yes, but I'm not him."

"Whaâ€¦ oh, yeah. Well, I â€¦ you're a good smith, too. And you did work with himâ€¦ So â€¦"

A ball had formed in Astrid's throat as the doubt congealed; She had been right, Heather's axe had not just seemed familiar. The craftsmanship had been too similar to her own to be ignored, too beautiful, light and balanced to be anyone else's work. Heather's axe was Hiccup's creation. It took all of her stubbornness not to leap into the smithy.

"I'll give it a look. Leave it here, ok? I have this mail to finish for Stoick."

"Fine!" Thuggory huffed, but he had a smile on his face as he exited. Astrid flattened herself against the wall, and her dragon somehow hopped onto the roof nearly noiselessly in the nick of time - a distant part of her mind noted that she STILL kept her wing extended over Astrid to keep her dry. There was something to be said about the work ethic of this dragon that made Astrid decide what she did next.

There was no use interrogating Cattongue - she could already hear Gobber nailing him with a few questions, and there was no need to add another voice to that chorus. Thuggory, however, was the son of an allied clan chief, and if he knew where Hiccup was, she could use his status against him. So tucking her hair into her clothes and raising her fur hood, Astrid called the nadder down and after asking permission, was allowed on top.

"Ok girl, here goes," she told the excited reptile. "Follow that man for me, the one who just came out? Let's see if we can herd him towards the woods, shall we?"

Astrid didn't have time to feel stupid for speaking to a dragon before the nadder took off, and the drenching she had been avoiding till now begun to seep through her clothing. The nadder swerved, forcing Astrid to hold on to the crest spikes and hook her knees around the dragon's wing joints. After a few moments, however, the exhilaration took over - she was flying, and this time, it was different from holding onto Cattongue and worrying about so many things. This time, she was flying, and she was also hunting.

The dragon gargled, Astrid's eyes sharpened through the storm and spotted Thuggory's bowed head as he tried to run from shelter to shelter before he reached her and Stoick's house, where all the heirs were staying.

"Let's give him a lift, shall we?" Astrid could swear her dragon laughed. Cattongue was right about one thing; she could feel that this was the start of a beautiful friendship. And in fact, the dragon dove without question, grabbed the Meathead heir and carried him yelling and yelping into the air. Astrid couldn't help laughing as the mighty Thuggory screamed like a girl as they flew through the storm, swearing and yelling up at her once he noticed it was her doing.

"Put me down!" he bellowed as they began grazing tree-tops, and his legs paddled frantically to avoid a wallop to the delicates.

"As you wish!" she called back, and somehow her dragon understood before Astrid could even puzzle out how to tell her what to do. Thuggory found himself falling, grunting as he bounced through the branches until he found a sturdy one. That is, until he slipped on the wet pine and fell flat on his back in the muddy undergrowth.

Again, she could swear her nadder laughed. Astrid was so giving her dragon a rub-down with polish.

Smirking maniacally, Astrid slid off the dragon's back, unholstered her still damaged axe and stepped on Thuggory's chest.

"What is WRONG with you! Why in Hel's teeth would you do that!" He quieted down when she held the blade of her axe close enough to cut him.

"I'll tell you right away," she hissed into the quiet of the undergrowth and the pattering rain. "Tell me where Hiccup is and I won't have to feed you to my nadder!"

He swallowed visibly as he looked at her, and her dragon approached from the side, eyeing him with interest. Astrid had to be careful with what she said; she didn't really want her nadder to eat her only source of information in years. He opened his mouth.

"And don't you dare lie to me," she warned. "I saw your axe and Heather's - they're exactly like this one, and there is only one person who can make an axe like this! My betrothed; so start talking!"

His mouth hung open like a fish. "Your what?"

"Betrothed, promised; what Heather was before you married her - are you dull in the head?"

"You're engaged to Hiccup!"

"So I was right! You do know something of him!" she said triumphantly. "Talk, or I'll shave you so close your head will fall off!"

=0=

This must be the most surreal experience of my life_, Thuggory found himself thinking as he looked up at the blonde Hooligan girl.

Hiccup was going to die when he told him. He was engaged and he didn't know it!_ Ha! Or, wait, did he?

And hadn't there been a girl he was mad about? The one that he'd made the axe for and got all bluesy about because she was married back home and - hang on, an axe? Like the one that was about to kill him right now!

Oh haha! This was priceless - or it was a joke, a ploy to get information out of him about Hiccup's whereabouts. After all, his friend had warned him that they may have Outcast the fellow heir. And did he REALLY not know? Thuggory could almost hear himself saying - the axe was almost a bride price. Still, Hiccup was engaged...

A grin spread on his face before he could stop it. The Astrid's glare clearly threatened to make his grin as wide as his head would go if he didn't take it seriously.

"So I take it my man Hiccup doesn't know he's got you waiting for him back home, aye?" he said cheekily, eyeing her up and down. "I don't see him staying away if he did." His gambit paid off. The girl moved off him like he burned her and stepped away. She was still looking at him with death in her eyes, though, and the nadder that had taken a fancy to her was still giving him a beady look, so he hastily got to his feet. "Why'd you get me out here, then?"

"I've already told you. I want to know where my betrothed is," she said, looking at him steadily. There was no doubt that if he tried to leg it, Thuggory would end up somewhere or somehow unpleasant, so he sighed and just sat back down in the mud, the rain pattering around them mutely among the pine trees.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Well, firstly, as I've just said, he's my betrothed, and I have a right to know. And secondly, he's the heir to our tribe! You should have at least mentioned something! He's been missing for years!"

"Missing, huh? I thought he was on a journey," Thuggory replied, enjoying the way she went white. However, something else passed over her face before she looked down.

"He is," she said, her tone still hard, but having lost some of its edge. "We've just lost contact with him. The tribe needs to know he's ok. And I said some things to him before he left. Some things I'd like to apologise for."

Thuggory didn't reply; just let her stew in her own soup.

"How long lost how long has it been, since you last saw him?" she asked, hesitantly. Thuggory looked at her some more. She had pushed her hood down and her fringe was wet, clinging to her forehead and off her eyes, for once. There was an honest, earnest look on her face that she couldn't fake if she wanted to - even his wily wife couldn't. In fact, if she had known what she looked like, she would probably have schooled her features. So he signed, and answered truthfully.

"They were his wedding gifts," he said as he waved to his own axe. The relief and gladness on her face took him by surprise.

"So, recently? He's ok? Alive and well?" she asked, more openly eager this time. Something didn't add up here; Thuggory didn't peg Hiccup as a liar, and yet this girl had always been a rather painful subject for him. He was, in fact, under the impression that she had hated him, or disregarded him completely, from the little Hiccup had said the one time they'd gotten him drunk. Yet here she was, acting like, well, a real betrothed. He decided to play a potentially cruel but necessary game.

"Depends what you mean by 'well'."

"What?"

"He was fine, physically, but he's got no place to go, really. Wouldn't really say anything about home, and my dad came home from the Thing every time saying Hiccup was travelling, and on a real man's voyage to prove himself, but every time I saw him, he didn't seem like he was happy to me."

There; guilt, sadness and worry on her face. Now for the parting shot.

"First time he came, he said he was 'Hiccup the Unwanted'."

Her eyes had gone wide, and she was looking at him in utter horror. Then she rolled her shoulders in what he interpreted to be a decision made.

"Where is he? Do you know?" When he didn't say anything and didn't budge, she added, "Please!"

"Tell me this first," he asked, ignoring the chittering dragon behind the woman who had taken umbrage with him upsetting the human girl. "Were you the reason why he told me that?"

Astrid looked down, her lips still pressed and bitten by anxious teeth before she nodded.

"I need to apologise. To do it a thousand times if I have to. I said what I did in a moment of anger and he just â€¦"

"Hmm," Thuggory replied. What had really happened between these two? After all, they were engaged. Had that happened before or after he had left? Had he left to free her from something she hadn't wanted at the time but had since regretted losing?

Ah, this was all so romantic. He had to tell Heather about it later so she could scoff at him, the dear manipulative woman.

"Do you know, or not?" she finally asked impatiently. Ah, he'd got lost in a romantic daydream of dramatic heroics and rescues, and he'd forgotten to answer her.

"No," he lied, feeling surprisingly guilty about it when her face fell. "He comes and goes, doesn't leave us anything except his good smithing."

"Oh â€¦ Still a good smith, huh?" she said sadly, looking at her own axe and then holstering it with a sigh. She turned away and walked towards her dragon, which began to nuzzle her before it lowered itself to let her on. And whoa was she a fast learner, now that he realised it.

"The best!" he confirmed. "But tell me something. Were you engaged before he left?"

"No. That was â€¦ that was after."

"He doesn't know?" Oh, oh this was priceless. Gold!

"Since when does a groom have a say in who he marries?" she replied with a wry smile. He gave a hearty laugh, still sitting on the wet grass. As the dragon rose again, with the blonde on her back, she hesitated for a moment. "If you â€¦ when you see him again. Would you tell him something?"

"What?"

"Tell him that Astrid says sorry. And please, please come back."

Then she took off. Thuggory just looked after her slack-jawed. Until a smirk began to spread on his face, that is, one that Heather and Cami were about to share real soon. Oh boy, he wanted to see Hiccup's

face _so bad_ when he told him this.

=0=

There was a small, abandoned hut at Troll Peak that had once belonged to a sheep farmer who had since moved on to the afterlife, and left no one in possession of it. The dilapidated building was seeing new life tonight in the form of large, burly men, the leaders and generals of the village, crammed into its tiny space. The silence of the dead of the night kept their voices low, but the subject was not any less heated for all that.

"Are we in agreement, then?" Stoick asked. His war council said aye. He fiercely looked at each one of them, stopping with Gobber, Spitelout and Hacknee the longest. "We do have a debt to repay, and we will repay it as best we can, but if this damn foreigner starts showing signs of wanting anything else, like sticking his hands on all of Berk, then we truss him up and ship him off to Ras's mercy. And if he resists, or that devil of his thinks it can get one-up on us, then Thor have mercy on their hides."

Nods and Ayes all around. There was a fiercely determined expression on each of the faces that were surrounding him. Stoick felt more bolstered than he had since they'd left for that damned journey. Hel must have known they'd been trying to penetrate her realm, and was punishing them for it.

"What changed your mind?" Spitelout asked when all the other men left the hut for their homes, and only he, Gobber and Stoick were left. "You were not in favour of the idea when we first spoke of it, since he's a guest and we're in his debt." Stoick gave him a grin through his beard.

"Hiccup's the one who smithed Thuggory and Heather's wedding axes," he replied. "Was there on Freezing not three weeks before we arrived for the wedding. Maybe if he's that close, he's ready to come home, and I have a heritage to pass on to him when he does."

Spitelout wasn't kind enough to ignore the inconsistencies in Stoick's story, the chief should have known better than to share his good mood.

"Why didn't he wait on Freezing, then? We'd have feasted the reunion at someone else's expense!" Spitelout gave a rather sly look. "If you ask me, he's grown used to the freedom, the women and the ale. I don't see no young man turn all that down to come back to a life of drudgery and toil, and getting tied down to one girl, no matter who she is!"

Stoick rolled his shoulders as Spitelout left, laughing, and Gobber pat him on the back.

"You know he's right, Stoick," the smith said, and Stoick gave him a wounded look. "I don't think Hiccup's the sort to be too taken with whoring, but you know as well as I do that he's not coming back. Take heart that he's alive and well, at least. That's more than we knew before."

"Right," Stoick replied, swallowing hard. He and Gobber left the hut, stepping into the early autumn rain and heading towards their own

homes.

=0=

****The secret political manoeuvres are part and parcel of this story. Enjoy their hints and red herrings. What Stoick and his generals are doing here is to plan a pre-emptive strike should 'Cattongue' decide to over-step his part of the agreement. By, I don't know, trying to take over Berk, for example. Now that Stoick knows Hiccup's alive and close, he wants to make sure he stays chief of Berk long enough to pass on the mantel to his son. If only he knewâ€|****

****I love dramatic irony. It is one of my favourite tools to use, so watch out for it!****

9. Day 3 - Morning

****For the first scene of this chapter, I would like to share a reading experiment with you all. ****

****1 -Please open two browser windows side by side, with this chapter on one side, and another website called 'sounds to sleep', easily found on google, on the other. This website works best with explorer or chrome.****

****2 â€"Before you even begin reading, put the sound for 'waves' on.****

****3 â€"Once you have reached the part where Hiccup leaves the group to sit next to the brazier, please switch on the sound for 'bonfire'.****

****I would be appreciative if you could tell me whether this addition has helped you feel more immersed in the scene, or whether it has disturbed you. Mixed media reading is something I am studying, and it would be great to include you all into my research. ****

****This is, of course, not an obligation and it is completely up to the individual reader's choice whether they want to participate.****

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1_

**Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir**

* * *

><p>Day 3

Morning

A few halls in the village still had lights on - one of them was a lighthouse at the very edge of a cliff, where the heirs were congregated for that night. Hiccup had offered to be included in the night watch roster, despite the fact that he had worked himself to the bone all day and been up before the sun. All of the heirs had decided they would spend the night with him, as ten eyes were better than two.

However, the horizon had gone unguarded for the better part of the last half hour, since Thuggory had dropped his bombshell. Toothless was the only one who was still following the frantically pacing Hiccup with his head. Everyone else had given up trying to look at the erratic man.

"But what do you mean engaged to me?" he asked for the millionth time.

"H- Cattongue, I swear I will throw my shoe at you if you don't quit it," Cami moaned, face buried in her dragon's hide. Hiccup ignored her.

"You really must have heard wrong," he said again, not giving Thuggory the time to reply. Not that he seemed to have any inclination to anymore. "And she really didn't say that. She couldn't have said â€|"

"Cattongue," Dogsbreath said, at last, unfolding his arms and sitting straight. Farthog stirred slightly, but snored on, "I do believe that an explanation is in order, as I feel you haven't been completely honest with me."

Hiccup winced. Looking at Toothless, he took some comfort in the fact that his dragon at least understood right away, as he gave the still night air a sniff and nodded to signal that the group was alone. At least his dragon had his back. Then Toothless nudged him towards Dogsbreath, and Hiccup sighed.

"Look, Dogsbreath, you're right, and I'm sorry. It's just that I was keeping this under wraps. They only found out because they remembered me," he said despondently, pointing to Cami and Thug. "Thing is, my name isn't Cattongue. It's Hiccup." He paused, and waited to see if Dogsbreath caught on. Hiccup had become a great friend of the quiet man, and knew he was smart.

"As in Hiccup Haddock, of Berk." Dogsbreath did not disappoint. Hiccup nodded. "That explains a great many things."

"Huh?" Cami asked, raising her head.

"Why he is working so tirelessly for Berk. Why he has no interest in using his current advantage politically. Why he negotiated his debt to be an obey-all-orders, rather than a place to stay and trade to ply as any other man would have. Why you," a sharp look, "have refused both offers to become a Meathead and an UglyThug." Hiccup winced. He did owe his friend a full explanation.

"And why you won't sleep with any of the Bog women who have been chasing your tail for years," Cami said with a grin. Hiccup groaned and hid his face in his hands. He would never live down the time he'd taken refuge on Cami's rafters from the rather insistent cousin who'd not taken no for an answer.

"That's different," he groaned.

"Yup, that's because you're only interested in one tail, and she's currently engaged to you and begging you to come back," Cami went on, nailing him with a look. "So, what's the story there? Gilted her, did

you?"

"What? No! I didn't even know! Heck, I don't believe it. She must have been just trying to get information. And she can't rough an allied clan's heir too much. And he's my friend, and they're in my debt, so she didn't want to piss 'Cattongue' off. Yeah, that has to be it."

He had begun pacing again, but finally sat down with a sigh. Toothless walked up behind him and seated himself so Hiccup could rest against him, but he was too restless. Getting to his feet again, he told the others he was slacking off his duty (which he had been!) and threw himself up the winding stairs to the top of the tower. Once there, he sat on the peak, stoking the fire in the brazier beside him, and made space for Toothless to join him on the platform.

Gods; yes, the gods themselves, they must hate him. It was a really cruel joke to play on a poor lonely bachelor, especially with this particular Viking woman at the other end of the deal. He'd almost swallowed his own tongue when he'd recognised her on the battle field. Still flaxen haired, still beautiful as Frigga, still fierce and determined. He'd been mooning with Toothless in the cove only yesterday, wondering who the lucky man she was engaged to was, and why in hell he was 'missing'. His heart had broken all over again at seeing her and knowing she was tied to someone - he'd known this would happen, Hel, he'd been ready to see her with two or three tots running around her ankles, but it had still been a shock somehow. He knew that he loved her; he'd never really lied to himself, in the same way that he'd known he'd have to work hard for her to even notice him. He remembered everything about her; when they were friends together as children, and then craning his head through the window in the forge, watching her grow while he struggled to keep up. He'd hoped that at least she'd been lucky enough to land Fishlegs - who had married Ruffnut and was a proud dad of a new little girl, unbelievably enough.

Berk had changed, and yet just enough had stayed the same that the ache in Hiccup's chest was almost unbearable at times. Working in the smithy with Gobber had been an ordeal - especially when he'd started asking who he'd learned to make the handle from, and how eagerly he'd taken all the semi-fabricated information about the 'wee lad' who had been his apprentice. He'd long known Gobber was the one who could have possibly taken his departure worst of all Berk, but he had felt guilt-ridden at the delight on the older man's face at any mention of 'Hiccup'.

And his dad - Hiccup didn't want to think about it. Dealing with Stoick the Vast as an abstract concept, as the Chief of the tribe he was helping, was something he could manage, something he could do for the sake of all the kids that ran underfoot as he walked through town with Toothless, and the stock of new teens he would be training with dragons tomorrow, and all the ones who had yet to come and who he used to know, and were now older and wiser. But dealing with Stoick his father, who hadn't even once mentioned his name - why should he? And yet Hiccup was ashamed that he had deeply desired to be missed, even slightly. Hiccup pushed it away, all of it, and took a deep, calming breath. Toothless warbled at him, curling around him more firmly, and he leaned back on the dragon for both their comfort.

Being on Berk again was harder than Hiccup had ever thought it would be. There were memories around every corner, and most of them were unpleasant. When he'd left, a large part of him had always thought he'd never be back. A smaller part of him had dreamed that if he'd make something of himself, if he managed to become â€| something more, he'd be able to return and face everyone.

It had been this tiny part of him that had grown and grown during that first winter. He'd almost died, either of cold or of starvation, several times, and it was only thanks to Toothless that he survived to see the following spring. He'd longed to turn tail and go back to Berk so fiercely once the ice had broken that the pain of it had competed with his gnawing belly. But he knew he couldn't go back, not with nothing to show for this absence but his emaciated face, so he'd done the opposite, picked the tiny island of as much as they could kill without making it barren, and turned his sights far south.

It had simultaneously been the best and the worst decision of his life. He'd visited lands and cultures he'd never dreamed of, gone as far as the new Rome in the East and traded pieces of amber there that to him were worthless, but which brought him so many goods he and Toothless could barely take off. It had had the dual effect of satiating both his physical hunger and his wanderlust. After a run in with the Pict tribe, he'd learned never to take Toothless with him, and to land in places where Toothless could then use his emergency fin and fly to an unreachable height. He still bore the scars of the hatchet that had tried to take his head off for riding a devilish dragon. He'd made sure to learn to fight properly after that.

He still bore, also, the mark - if only in memory alone - of the first woman he had been with. She had taken him to her tent, bleeding and near faint with fright, and Toothless had followed them there. She was an army follower, and through a few common words and gestures, they had managed to communicate sparsely while she sewed him up. He'd felt terribly guilty for taking up her living space, food, and bloodying her clothes, but she had been amiable and patient. She had also had beautiful; long, flaxen hair, blue eyes and freckled cheeks. Her features were different, her voice and language completely foreign, but when she had decided to kiss him and touch him one night, he hadn't refused her, and just buried his face in blonde hair shining in candle light, flaxen just like hers, allowing himself a few hours of a happiness he'd thought he'd never have, and all the nights that followed. She had been a very lonely girl herself, telling him through their stilted way of communicating that her name was Josepha and that she had been reduced to this through her family dying of illness. He'd even taken her with him for a while, finally leaving her behind in a sea village where she had found employment, and new hope in the form of a widowed fisherman to whom they were brother and sister. He had left another part of his soul behind when he'd taken off on Toothless for Constantinople without her. When he'd returned to the archipelago to face the following winter, he'd been armed with new knowledge, supplies, new smithing techniques, and dreams at night that substituted one blonde woman with another. And despite being only three hour's flight away from Berk, he'd always made sure to travel to the islands farthest from it when he wanted to smith and trade, teach about dragons, and haggle his way into a better winter lodging.

Now here he was again, on the island where he'd left his childhood and dreams behind, older, wiser, and not at all more worthy, for all

of the five more years he'd lived in the world, to be his father's son. The engagement Thuggory spoke of had to be a lie, a bogus excuse to make asking for information legitimate. Astrid was probably the heir - she behaved like it, was at Stoick's right hand (_as he'd always wished to be_) all the time, to the point where Hiccup had assumed it. She was probably protecting her position.

He'd have to be careful how he fixed Heather's axe. He'd have to be careful in general. He wanted, more than anything, for Berk to prosper and taste some of the benefits a positive relationship with the dragons brought, and which he'd seeded in almost all the other islands in the archipelago. That wouldn't happen if they found out they'd been tricked into following the instructions of Hiccup the Useless, turned into a lynch mob and then drove the dragons out again in one flaming, massive ball of Viking rage.

He groaned at himself, pulling his knees to his face and burying it there. He wasn't volunteering for the night watch again. Too much time on his hands, too much time to think, and there were just too many things to do and too many horrible, painful things to think about. Best for him that he sleep through the night in the cove, and wake up before the sun to work himself to the bone before the damned huge dragon arrived.

"Hey, scooch over." Hiccup jumped, looking up to find Thuggory trying to get up beside him. Toothless grumbled at him, but moved just enough to let the other man climb onto the brazier tower.

"Look Thug, not now, ok?" Hiccup told him, and he averted his eyes, glad that his voice hadn't broken at least. He didn't need one more humiliation tonight.

"Hey, it's ok brother, I get it." Thug threw an arm around Hiccup's shoulder, and although he gave not a few grumbles, Toothless let them both lean back against him, and curled to put his head on Hiccup's lap (and slap Thuggory with his tail).

They sat in silence for a while. The noise of the waves hitting the shores of the island's cliffs underneath was almost deafening, starting small and hushed as it hit rocks in the distance, and then rising to a roar as it smashed on the rocks beneath them, only to fade into the distance again as the same wave broke on the shore line further out. The ebb and flow of it lulled them for a while, night birds sometimes joining in, and the crackling of the brazier punctuated the quiet.

"Hiccup," Thuggory said in a low voice. Hiccup hummed in reply, eyes trained on a horizon that was already lightening. The sun rose early this time of year; the third or fourth hour after midnight would already give a pinkish horizon. "I know you may not want to hear this, but I think you should."

A lump formed in Hiccup's throat again, but he nodded, ignoring his increased heart rate.

"She said something else. Didn't want to say it in front'a all the others - Said that she didn't mean what she'd said - said it 'in a moment of anger'. Seems to think you left because of that and was pretty cut up about it." Hiccup took a deep breath and shifted uncomfortably but Thuggory went on before he could speak. "Look, I

won't tell you what to do, ok? I'd never." Thuggory rubbed Hiccups head, and for a moment the noise of the waves and the fire took over again. "But â€¦ try to talk to her. As 'Cattongue', you know? Sound the terrain. If you don't like what you see, move on. If you do â€¦ you have time to think about it. You can always come back to Freezing after this is done."

"I can't."

"What?"

"I can't. Your dad knows it's me now, remember? If I'm chased out of Berk, I won't compromise the peace with Freezing to Death by sheltering there. Hell, if Berk knows I'm 'Cattongue', I won't be able to go anywhere."

"Oh â€¦"

"Yeah â€¦"

"Maybe it won't come to that. Like I said," Thuggory rubbed his head again, "sound the terrain. Upturn some rocks, see what comes out. You may as well try while you're here. I know you miss it, so don't lie to me."

He snorted and was silent for a while. "You're a romantic idiot," Hiccup sighed.

"Been speaking to my wife, huh?" They chuckled quietly. Toothless huffed in Hiccup's lap, and a massive wave broke on the rocks beneath them with a noise like the thunder of Thor, sea spray reaching the two young men on the brazier and forcing Hiccup to throw a log in with a shower of sparks and spits. The stars shone brightly, almost trying to compete with the horizon going pink. The air smelled and tasted of fresh salt and embers.

"So, she's her, huh? The one you made the axe for."

"... I don't want to talk about it, Thug."

"Ok."

They watched the sun rise quietly. The snores from below told the two men the rest of them had gone to sleep - or perhaps Cami was still awake and listening, Hiccup could never predict with that girl. Still, Cami was the one who could always discern the most of his thoughts out of them all, so he supposed it wouldn't make much of a difference anyway.

When the sun was fully above the horizon, he stood and stretched, ignoring his grumbling dragon as he tried to work the sea-air's chill out of his joints.

"The next watch is up," he said, spotting a Flyn from the Hopperdottir clan making his way towards the lighthouse. "I have a class to teach, and then I have to go back to the forge while they eat lunch. You up to go shake the others, and get them to log and gather a few good trees? The carpenters will be starting on the new machines today; may as well have some wood ready to get them going."

Thuggory smiled at him, and Hiccup smiled back as he helped him up. He imagined that if he'd had a brother, he'd have been lucky to have one like Thuggory. Stretching one last time, he snapped his helmet back on and nudged his dragon until he got a lick across the neck for his efforts.

Ignoring Thuggory's laughter, he waved and shot off, dropping altitude by Flyn to salute him and then moving on towards the academy. The younger children, who had been knee-high when Hiccup had left, were now the 'new recruits'. And it was their turn to be introduced to whatever dragons had been caught but not yet been partnered, and to be taught on the task that Hiccup had in mind for them. And he would really go to the forge, and start work on some of the traps and preparations Gobber said he needed help with. And meanwhile, if he saw Astrid, maybe he could â€| no. He had to give the chain mail he'd done to his dad â€| to Stoick today, and that was going to be taxing enough.

It was the start of another long day.

=0=

There was a small, loud one; a completely mad one; a slightly older, snoozy girl and a few balls of energy. And that was before he even began dealing with the Viking Children.

Ruffnut had bundled her baby up and gone to visit her husband - not because she missed the big lug, oh no. She just needed to keep herself unpredictable - as he worked with the other carpenters. On the way back, the commotion in the ring had drawn her and several other passer-bys to the metal railing, and she had now been there for a good hour, grinning madly and cradling her little monster as she suckled.

Cattongue was standing there, arms crossed, Viking children standing in a line - all except for Gustav, who was standing against the wall, arms extended and trembling, carrying a bucket in each hand. Ruffnut grinned devilishly at the impertinent little boy; she liked the way this Cattongue dealt with bullies - first forcing Snotlout to take the nightmare or be called a coward, and now isolating Gustav while he taught the other children, leaving the 13 year old to get the dregs of whatever dragons remained.

Her husband had taken in the gronkle Cattongue had brought with him - the smith had been none too happy about it, apparently because he used the dragon in the smithy, and had requested that Meatlug (her husband gave awesome names) be at his disposal. But her big lug of a husband and his meat lug of a dragon had bonded so well that Cattongue hadn't been able to deny it. He'd seemed resigned, and Ruffnut could be going nuts with all the milk in her body right now, but he'd apparently seemed almost happy for the gronkle.

He was a good man, that much, at least, she could discern. He was patient with the children, and if some of the women around her were correct, he'd just come from a night watch. Even her Fishlegs would brush her off sometimes when he was nose-deep in a new book, but this one was holding the children's hands every step of the way.

Children - she snorted, causing her daughter to grumble up at her and

kick. Ruffnut frowned at her daughter; if she turned out to resemble her uncle Tuffnut, Ruff would drown her herself. But the children down there were only 5 years younger than her, and yet she was feeling so much older than them, between becoming the mistress of her own home and carrying the tot to term.

Looking better, Ruffnut realised that her youngest sibling was down there, too. Nuthead, their littlest brother, was only ten years old and the youngest in class. Gustav had been picking on him and on Sven 'Fleetfoot' Lufthaus's youngest daughter; serves the little bastard right to be shunted to the corner.

"Go on Nut, show them how it's done!" she called down, and the little boy looked up at her with a grin, adjusting his helmet, before sitting down among the terrors. Cattongue had apparently set bait traps in the woods to catch a few damned reptiles, and there hadn't been a shortage of the small, multi-coloured pests. Still, the way Cattongue handled them, you'd think they were kittens, just playing a harmless game of bat-the-string. Speaking of the devil, the night fury guy knelt down beside her seated brother, told him a few words and gave him a three small herrings. With a resolute nod, Cattongue stepped back and waved the rest of the children to do the same.

Nuthead rolled his shoulders like any good Thorston would, grabbed the fish and stood up. He started waving them at the terrors, which were instantly in a gaggle to get them, and immediately began to look at his teacher and follow instructions. Stand straighter, he was told; he did it right away. Tell them you only have three, and that you will chose who to give them to; he followed that order without a stammer, she was pleased to note, and the terrors stood instantly at attention, as if they'd been speaking Norse since they day they hatched. Ruffnut glanced at Cattongue, who was still standing tall, arms folded, with all the children huddled around him, barking directions. Before long, her baby brother had chosen three tiny dragons of different colours and, still following instructions, lured them away from the others with a fish and then moved to the side to begin what Cattongue called 'bonding', but what Ruffnut called a 'good-ol'-belly-rub'. She could understand the dragons; she loved a belly rub herself.

"Looks like it is going good!"

Ruffnut looked up to see her idiot brother and the Bog woman come up, sitting on the log beside her. She ignored the lump of bread he tried to shove at her face, and ignored him as he made stupid noises at her baby. Their little girl had better have her father's intelligence. And her mother's. Just not her uncle's.

"Oooh, Cattongue doing it to that little turd, huh?" Cami asked, nodding towards Gustav. Ruffnut looked up, and the boy had apparently begun complaining angrily. Cattongue stood there and listened for a few moments, and then grabbed a small bucket of fish and shoved the handle into the boy's mouth and began yelling at him.

"Listen to me, and listen well. This isn't a game, and you are not going to be receiving a new toy sword here. When you bond with a dragon, they will have your back, always." The night fury seemed to bloody understand what the man was saying and walked up, sitting behind him and growling as if to make a point. Some of the people

around her started to whisper. Cami huffed a laugh. "They will protect you, and they will fight with you to the death, just like a brother Viking would. So you get your head screwed on right, and treat them with respect, or you can leave this arena right now. There aren't enough dragons for our defence as it is, and I won't waste one on someone who will be a danger to himself, his dragon and his comrades on the battle field. Am I clear?"

Gustav tried to nod, but could barely lift his head back up due to the fish's weight. Cattongue took the bucket from his mouth, and then took the two from his arms away also. Tuffnut beside her snickered when Gustav whined in relief, but it still must have been all the milk and mum-feelings inside her, because Ruffnut felt slightly sorry for the twerp. Ung, she was going soft.

"Right. You go apologise to Nuthead and Dartbolt. When you're done, we'll see about giving you your own dragon â€" but only if you prove to me that you can work in a team. This is a village; when you fight, you fight for yourself and for everyone in it with you. Clear?"

"Clearâ€|"

"Works every time," Cami said beside her. Ruffnut looked at her in askance as she tried to burp her daughter (and the stupid husband of hers had better decide a name, because she was tired of saying 'the baby'!).

"There's always an asshat in every class â€" it's like a guarantee. We on Bog don't even bet on it anymore â€" there's always someone's daughter who thinks she can one-up Cattongue. Uses the bucket trick every time, then either makes them apologise, or gives them a drinking horn and makes them fill fifty buckets of water with it. And if that doesn't work, it's dung duty â€" they always hate that. Gets them in line quick as you please, I tell you. 'Specially hates the bullies."

"Yeah, he seems to be a decent sort," one of the other mothers said, nodding to Ruffnut. She'd been standing there long before the younger mother had dropped in to look, and they'd exchanged a few comments between them â€| what was her name againâ€| oh, Dryleaf, Dartbolt's mum. The woman had probably come to see how her elder daughter fared, and was currently clutching onto Dartfoot's hand with a clenched fist; the second little girl had a perchance for escaping, especially since her father had imprudently given her a lock-picking set. Dartfoot was chewing on her fist right now, and looking down at her sister with rapt attention.

"Oh aye, that he is," Cami said with a shrug. "I'd say he's an idiot for it, but it brought us good things on Bog, so I shan't slight it."

"Oh?" Dryleaf asked.

"He's generous, and too kind, sometimes, even to people who have done him ill. But I can tell you, he's Viking alright. Don't want to cross him; you know what they say about the temper of the quiet ones."

"Ah yes, my Fleetfoot's one such," Dryleaf said. "Quiet as a mouse most days, but when he thunders, Thor couldn't hold him!" She gave a

laugh, sitting down on their log beside Cami and bringing her daughter to her knees. Ruffnut was glad; her own baby seemed fascinated with the older one and stopped fussing and fidgeting. Now mummy could listen in peace. Waitâ€¦ had she just thought of herself as _mummy_? Ung, she was disgusted. And Fishlegs was going to be ridiculously pleased. Speaking of whomâ€¦

"So's Fishlegs," Ruffnut interjected proudly. "Should have seen him this one time; Snotlout thought it would be funny to try to make me slip on some ice during my third month. Fishlegs strung him up by the ankles, butt-ass naked, and wouldn't let him down until Stoick _made_ him."

"Oh, I like that!" Cami said, slapping her shoulder, and then ruffling her daughter's hair. "H- He, Cattongue, I mean, would probably have done it more subtly. And somehow involved the dragons. And made it _fair_, because he's an idiot like that. Or maybe not, come to think of the circumstance â€" Don't think I've ever seen a more family-man-man than that guy."

"He is married, then?" Dryleaf asked, and Ruffnut thought she saw a glimmer in her eye, until she realised that Dryleaf was also picking the Bog heir's brain for information on the man.

"Oooh, no. Not for lack of trying, I can tell you. Not interested myself, have to say â€" too goody-two-shoes, not mischievous enough; not my type." Had Cami just given a slide-glance towards _her brother_? Ung, Ruffnut was going to be _sick_. "But there were some women on Bog who'd have given their shields up for a piece of him; useless, I'm 'fraid." Cami shrugged. "He's as faithful as they come. In love with a girl, somewhere from wherever he's from, and never looked at another woman."

"Where _is_ he from?" Dryleaf asked casually, adjusting her daughter in her lap.

Cami smirked. "Oh, no idea," she replied just as casually. Ruffnut knew that face; she'd worn it herself countless times. Cami knew _exactly_ where Cattongue was from, which not only meant that the Bog heir was holding out on them, but that she also knew they were stringing her up to dry - for all the good it was going to doing them. It was like dealing with one of Loki's children.

She _liked_ this girl. And judging by the look on her brother's face, she wasn't even the only one.

This meant two things â€" oh, marrying Fishlegs had made her notice more than one thing at a time, bless him. She needed to go out and practice her spear-work² before she started getting the urge to learn to read _books_. Anyway, two things; first, she wasn't sure now if anything the blonde girl had said was true, and second, she totally had to tell Fish` anyway. He'd be able to make something out of it while she went out to make holes in trees. Maybe Astrid would come with her â€¦ it had been a while since they'd bonded over splinters, and she missed her friend.

=0=

1 This is a shoutout to Foxygirl - hey Foxy! Her versions of Hiccup and Astrid move into a re-kitted lighthouse as a home after they

marry in Plans, her first - if for M readers only! - multi-chaptered work in this fandom. Her second, an AU called Chasing Thunderstorms, and it's follow up Stages of Grief are both narratives I strongly, strongly recommend. Her talent has only increased with age and practice.

2 I gave Ruffnut a spear as a weapon of choice in honour of, what I consider to be, the best Hiccup story of this fandom: 'The Choice', by Reens. This story has much less attention than it deserves, which is a pity, as I can't imagine any fan of the pairing not loving how well it is paced and how faithfully it is characterised. English is not the author's first language, so there are some errors; they are not glaring and are ignorable, however, and detract nothing from the beauty of this particular re-telling of the original HTTYD 1 story.

=0=

****The third and fourth days are divided into three, as they would have been whopping massive chapters otherwise. This is also part of the reason why I started updating twice a week, so the gap wouldn't be so large.****

****This chapter contained a look into the past five years for Hiccup; they have not been easy. This story starts his process towards the recovery and reintegration of his home. Please feel free to ask me questions; however, I will not necessarily be able to answer them. This story is fairly self-contained, and I like to leave some things up to readers' imaginations.****

****I operate on the system where, if the dragon has the same name as the film, it is the same dragon. If it does not have that name ... then it is not. How Meatlug managed to survive and end up on Hiccup's island? There is a tiny, one-sentence hint about how she escaped in chapter 8.****

****Also, now my other crack pairing should be pretty clear. They are so perfect for one another, in all their crazy, destructive glory, I don't know how no one's thought of it before.****

10. Day 3 - Afternoon

****This part comes right after the last scene in the previous chapter, where Hiccup is training the children with their dragons.****

****Thank you to all those who participated in the multimedia-reading experiment.****

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1</p>

**Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir**

* * *

><p>Day 3

Afternoon

Hiccup dragged himself to Gobber's forge, leaning slightly on Toothless, who was making disapproving little croons, which started them off on a grunt-verbal spar that made Hiccup look mad in everyone's eyes except his dragon's.

And he wasn't even winning.

"I am seriously not bailing out on him, so stop the hairy eyeballing," he said, narrowly avoiding a whack with a wing-tip. "You know, I'm not quite convinced that you give a damn, save making sure the fish-giving doesn't stop, seeing as you keep insisting on inflicting bodily harm." Toothless promptly proceeded to laugh at him, and whack him a good one on the bum.

Arriving at the forge to find it empty was a surprise, as Gobber had said he needed help with something. It must not have been unattended for long; the coal was still running hot enough to swelter the air, despite the open side. Hiccup took his helmet off, wiping the sweat on his brow and feeling the exhaustion creeping in, wishing Gobber would come soon so they could get some work in and he could go to sleep, early, after he was done with the second part of the new recruits' lesson. This was only his third night on Berk, and he was already feeling three years older.

What he really needed was a rag of snow. Hiccup often used a snow-soaked rag when he wanted to get himself going again, even if only for a jot of time. He began to look around, Toothless giving him a hand, but they didn't find any. The trapdoor up into the small attic Gobber didn't fit in had been barred closed, so they couldn't be there anymore. Gobber used to keep a wealth of rags in the smithy â€" they were good to clean newly made weapons, not to mention, good to slap against a sleepy apprentice's face after being dunked in snow. Hiccup supposed Gobber had made him some sort of masochist by tradition.

Reluctantly, Hiccup moved towards the tiny back room he used to occupy. He had avoided that room since he'd returned, not only because he didn't want to see what had been done to one of his only havens on Berk, but he also didn't want to remember that particular conversation with his father. It felt utterly strange to have to stoop down to go in, especially when he remembered passing through the door with a good gap above the top of him. It was pitch black in there, so he fished around until he found a candle.

"Give me some light, bud?" he asked his friend, who promptly supplied just the right flame to light the candle without burning Hiccup's face off. He smiled at the dragon, who butted his belly with his black head. The control Toothless had with his fire was something Hiccup would someday have with his smithing hammer; it was a personal goal.

Any thought of personal achievement left him when he turned back towards the room. Oh, he found the rags, alright. They were neatly piled in a corner, on two smallish â€" by Viking standards â€" stools as soon as you crawled into the room. The ones Hiccup used to use in fact. Hiccup wasn't prepared for the rest of what he found.

His desk was still here. The sketches and the larger prototypes he'd hidden in the far corner of the attic and under a loose floorboard in

the smithy were strewn not only on the desk, but all over the room. Hiccup lit some more candles, looking around open-mouthed at his workshop, which looked almost as if he hadn't left at all. Toothless followed him in curiously, neck craning as he couldn't come in beyond his wings, then whined as he nosed a hanging piece of leather which had yesterday been on a wooden knob outside.

And with a jolt, he recognised it. It was his old apron, the one he'd flung on a hundred times, during a normal calm day, during a raid, during a sleepless night of planning and painstaking smiting on one of his projects. More of his work and prototypes "and some things that almost seemed to be Gobber's attempts to bring his blueprints to shape" were pinned all over the sides, strewn on tables and shelves that were new. Nailed to the wall above his desk, Hiccup recognised his own handwriting. The letter he'd left for Gobber was the centrepiece, surrounded by all his best sketches and blueprints. Gobber had written five words underneath Hiccup's own in his rough, uneven hand.

Make it up to him.

Hiccup touched the bottom of the letter incredulously, lifting it slightly off the wall to give it a better look. He had to be seeing things.

"_Oi, get your hands OFF that!_" Hiccup jumped and turned to see the smith trying to shoulder his way in, despite the dragon in the way. "Who told you that you could go in there, ya stupid piece of du-â€|"

Gobber stopped mid-sentence, looking at Hiccup with the same slack-jaw that Hiccup seemed to have developed. The younger smith didn't quite comprehend why at first.

"_Hiccup?_"

Something cold and terrified ran up Hiccup's spine. His eyes went wide, and he slapped his own face when he realised that he hadn't put his helmet back on in his quest to find the stupid rags. He looked at Gobber in total panic, and realised too late that he should have just acted _confused_, and now he'd given himself _away._

"Sons of Odin and Frigga, it's really yeâ€|"

Before Hiccup or Toothless could react, Gobber managed to somehow squeeze himself into the room and engulf Hiccup in a hug.

"Praise Thor and Asgard, yer really alive and well," Gobber muttered into his shoulder "shoulder! Hiccup couldn't remember a time when Gobber hadn't towered over him, but though he was certainly broader, there was no denying that Gobber didn't reach his nose. Still, damn the man had a grip. Hiccup couldn't wriggle out no matter how he tried until the older man let him go long enough to slap his shoulders and give him a light shake. "Look at you, you've grown like a weed! Still thin as one, but you've got strength in those arms if the smithy's any witness! Oh, boy, look at you!"

Beaming up at him through his moustache, the old smith looked happy enough to burst, and Hiccup found himself smiling back with some gladness, and simply surrendered and returned the hug. Gobber

proceeded to squash him until Hiccup had to slap his back or choke. Toothless kept making curious croons and trying to nudge his way in, causing Gobber to back away slightly.

"Can't believe it, still can't believe it, my boy Hiccup, all grown, hopping onto dragons and leading a small army into battle. Ha ha!"

"Gobber," Hiccup finally said, some of his happiness at Gobber's enthusiastic reaction to his identity dampening. "Keep it down!"

"Whatever for!" the other Viking said, face still split in a grin. "All 'a Berk should know! This is news worth the Hall's caskets of the best mead â€" oh, wait till yer father finds ou" â€"

"No!"

The smithy went quiet. A raincloud let loose above them, so that the sudden pitter-patter filled the silence. Gobber's smile slowly faltered and fell off his lips into a questioning look. Hiccup swallowed.

"Look, Gobber, I'm glad to see you too. Very glad; so glad you'll never know how much, but â€|"

"Bu` â€|?" Gobber asked leadingly, and already Hiccup could hear the palpable disappointment in his voice, and see a very distinct shadow in his eyes that had never been in merry smith's face before. Guilt was added in spades to the feelings Hiccup associated with Berk.

"I don't want anyone else to know." Gobber opened his mouth right away, but Hiccup cut him off. "_Please_, Gobber. They can't know they're following the direction of 'Hiccup the Useless'. If even one of them starts protesting, we'll waste precious time. If they go back to the council, we could waste _days_, and we don't _have_ days. The village needs to be prepared when this thing comes, and even I don't know how long we have. _Please_, Gobber."

"Hiccupâ€|" a sigh, "At least yer father, Hiccup, he should know" â€"

"No Gobber, him most of all!" Hiccup said, dread forcing him to stop the other man before he could finish that sentence. At the smith's look, he went on, "telling him will be like telling everyone. He'll plough through things, ask questions later, ignore who he topples and what plans he squashes on the way. And â€| he won't listen, not to me." He swallowed a lump. "He never has, and if you take off the helmet and the debt the village has, all that's left is 'Hiccup the Useless'." He swallowed more sharply because his throat was closing. "Again."

The pitter-patter took over the smithy again, along with Toothless's more insistent crooning and the hissing of the coals as water droplets randomly splashed the hotter parts of the smithy's interior. While Toothless somehow managed to wiggle himself into the tiny room with them, Gobber looked at Hiccup with an expression the young smith couldn't decipher. There was just too much going on behind his eyes for Hiccup to read, until the older man's only hand came up to cup Hiccup's face.

"You were ne'er Hiccup 'the useless' to me, lad," he said fondly, and Hiccup finally gave in, and let himself be hugged to within an inch of his life as he buried his leaking eyes in the man's shoulder. "I've missed ye, lad. Missed yer constant prattle keeping me sane, and the inventions, and someone to give me my 'ands and â€¦. I've missed you, lad."

Something inside Hiccup welled sharply, and then eased into a soothed throbbing. At least someone, one person, had missed him.

"Promise, Gobber." It came out choked, but somehow it didn't matter, because it was Gobber. "Will you promise on your anvil?"

"Ah, lad, you drive a hard bargain," Gobber replied, and Hiccup pushed away to look at him. The older man ran a hand down his face, rubbing his knotted moustache, before nodding resignedly. "I promise, just on one condition." A look that was almost shy. "Don't you disappear on me like that again, aye? You'll send word, wherever you are?"

"Unless I'm in Asgard or in Hel's realm, and even then I'll try," Hiccup laughed with relief. Gobber slapped his back, and Toothless nudged him for nearly toppling Hiccup over.

"Oi, you have to tell me everything about this big boy of yours," Gobber said with a snigger, looking at Toothless with something akin to fondness now. Hiccup's mouth twitched into a happy smile, a lightness in his chest he'd forgotten how to feel a long time ago, so he dragged two stools, closed the door, and told Gobber everything.

=0=

**Shorter than usual, perhaps, but I'm sure most of you will agree that Gobber deserved his own little niche. **

And again, most of you guessed that Gobber would be the one who would find him out first; it makes logical sense. Despite Stoick being his father, he paid little attention to Hiccup that wasn't deep apprehension for his well-being, or anger and frustration at his messes. Astrid and the teens were his peers, but though Astrid was more observant than the others, it is still Gobber who was closest to the boy.

**I do love Gobber. Very, very much so. There will be none of that ridiculous reduction of him into a stupid bufoon that happened in 'Viking for Hire' here. I'm beginning to detest that TV show for making stupidity look entertaining at lovely characters' expense, like Gobber and the twins, and sacrificing continuity on the alter of 'big bad dragon of the week'.
>

(PS: No, the letter to Gobber shall remain between these two. I wrote it, but deleted it. No words are profound enough, or touching enough, to bring the amount of emotion Gobber or Hiccup must have felt. Like this, each individual reader's version is as valid as the other; it is the emotions that are important, not the words).

11. Day 3 - Evening

****Again, a shorter but frightfully important chapter, with focus on one character. Please pick it apart at your leisure.****

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1_

**Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir**

* * *

><p>Day 3

Evening

Astrid and Fishlegs walked back to Berk together after a long day of wading in wood carvings. Fishlegs was a carpenter by trade, and Astrid, for want of something else to occupy her hands when she didn't want to think, had taken up woodwork from Stoick, and was now helping to carve out the sharper, more precise parts of the war machines that they were preparing on blueprints given to them by Cattongue and Gobber.

"It's genius, I tell you," Fishlegs was prattling on, wiping his face with a rag to cool himself off after the day's toil and holding a design up. "How did Cattongue come up with this? Look at the spring-coil on this, the simplicity of it! It would take at least five men to haul and throw a net this size, but with this, wham! A lever, and even my little Woodnut can do it!"

"You need to tell Ruffnut you named your daughter," Astrid said with a smile, despite herself, "and present her at the Great Hall."

"Aha, I'll do that," Fishlegs relied, obviously lying. Astrid gave him a look. "What! They start growing so fast once you name them, everyone says that!"

"Oh Fishlegs, she'll grow fast regardless, and you'll have more soon besides," Astrid said, stopping alongside him to pat his shoulder as they exited the tree-line, just in view of the village. "You'll have to name her eventually, before she becomes convinced her name is 'baby' or 'you'. Then Ruffnut _will_ murder you."

"Oh, I know, I know!" he huffed, irritated. Astrid gave him a moment and kept looking at him in askance. He finally sighed, and turned to her with such worry on her face as she'd only ever seen on her own mother's. "I don't want her to grow, Astrid. And as silly as that sounds – in this world where we're at war all the time, my little girl deserves something better."

"Ah," Astrid said, finally understanding. "Well, if this goes well, we should have a better place for all the children."

"Or else Berk can be burned to a crisp because we decided to go poke Hel with a sharp stick in her own realm. Yup," Fishlegs said with conviction. Astrid elbowed him playfully, and he let out a snigger, though they both knew that was a real possibility. Still: Vikings,

death. Went hand in hand. It was life that worried them, not dying in glory.

"You seem to be setting a good example," Astrid said, looking behind them at the gronkle and the nadder who were chittering to one another, each following one of them home. Astrid hadn't had time to construct any decent sleeping arrangements for her girl, with all the attention focused on the imminent attack, but the roof seemed to serve her perfectly well for now, if some of the toggle was suffering.

"It hasn't taken much effort; as you know." The look he gave her spoke volumes; they both knew the other had grown surprisingly fond of their new companions, who had been enemies until barely any time ago. "I still can't believe no one ever thought of this, you know, even Bork. To fight fire with fire."

"Hard to believe we're standing here at all with all limbs intact, and that they let us ride them. Not when so many people lost life and limb to them." Astrid's nadder came up for a nuzzle, as if apologizing for past misdeeds she hadn't even committed. Or perhaps she had. This particular nadder had never hurt Astrid, but she may have been the one who gobbled up someone's hand, or foot, or flock of sheep. Astrid's axe was similarly stained in dragon blood, even though not this particular girl's.

"Makes sense when you think of it that way," Fishlegs concurred. "Ah, and here's the man of change himself. I want to ask him a few things, but â€¦ I think I'll leave it for tomorrow. Ruffnut does a really good gull stew, and we caught a few just yesterday. Care to come along? Ruffnut always seems to think she has to compete with my mum's portionsâ€¦"

Astrid smiled at him, still looking at Cattongue as he made his slow way to the plaza. A number of children could be seen skittering about, some holding dragons on their backs and shoulders, and some - was that Gustav with the baby nadder? - racing them home. Two little girls were walking home and very loudly arguing which one of their whispering deaths was fiercest, despite either of them being large enough to eat both little girls in one gulp. A younger boy and girl raced home with three terrors coiled around their bodies and hanging off their helmets.

"What'd you know," Fishlegs said, "Dragons that don't carry off little children at all."

"You're going to have to find something new to threaten yours with," Astrid said with a laugh.

"By the looks of things, I'll have to ground her from taking the dragon out." They gave a laugh. "You coming?"

Astrid's eyes turned to the plaza again, where Cattongue was looking at all the children and shooing off the last few before he began crossing the open square, headed towards her and the woods.

Cattongue had never slept in Stoick's lodge. He'd always kept to the woods, maintaining that someone needed to keep the heir's dragons out of trouble. Somehow, Astrid had never thought of where he went, or

what he did once Berk's late-summer sun started to drop, taking the temperatures with it.

"No, thanks. I have to get the pot running for everyone." Her household chores had triplicated; at least Heather was giving a hand. They were living off stews and Hall mutton, but there was little else she could do. She had never been a home-type woman anyway.

"Will be next time, then!" Fishlegs said to her, walking eagerly towards the village, "and I won't take no for an answer!"

She waved at him, feeling inexplicably warm to know her friends were happy in their marriage. The match had been arranged, just like most others, but at least they'd somehow found a balance of crazy and extremely rational.

Still, everything was sort of crazy. A gronkle was following Fishlegs, eyes large and tongue lolling eagerly like a puppy as he spoke to her like a baby while they went. Astrid still had her nadder body guard, who dropped her large, toothed head to delicately take a few wood shavings off her hair and clothing; she had never been better groomed. It was something between disconcerting and funny now, a few days into suddenly having a nadder shadow instead of a nadder head mounted on a spear.

Something caught her eye, and she stopped, still standing on the high rise that led from the woods to the back door of the Haddock hall. Cattongue had stopped in the middle of the plaza, close enough for her to see, but not for her to hear. He seemed to be having some sort of conversation with his dragon - Astrid had stopped considering this absurd after her nadder had laughed at a joke the blonde had made, then brought her the hammer she'd threatened the obstinate block of wood with and stood eagerly waiting to see her have at it.

Maybe he was changing his mind about his sleeping arrangements. Astrid had heard from some men that Cattongue had gone off to the forge between teaching the children all day, even taking them to different location to train the whispering deaths; and this after a night watch, which was not unheard of, but an extra mile this man was going for a village that was not his own. She should at least offer him a meal, if he would still refuse to sleep indoors and leave the dragons alone in the woods to get up to whatever mischief domesticated dragons got to. Astrid signalled her nadder to stay put, and then briskly walked down the hill to the plaza.

Upon reaching the final corner, however, and just before she exited into the open space at the centre of the village, Cattongue laughed, and she stopped dead in her tracks.

"And what were you going to do, little lady, once we left Berk and went into the forest?"

"Fwollowed you!" piped up a very young voice, words pronounced clumsily. Astrid peeked around the house's corner and spotted Cattongue kneeling in front of Dartfoot, Dryleaf's littlest one, who as standing stoutly in front of him very much in an imitation of her father.

"And then how would you get home to your dinner, when I sat down to have mine in front of the nice warm fire?" Cattongue asked gently,

but the smile on his voice didn't need her to see through his helmet to know that he was amused, and his dragon sat down beside him, eyes wide as it looked at the child, tail swishing. She might have thought it a predatory look three days ago. Now she knew the big black dragon was anticipating play time. It seemed particularly fond of small children.

"I would have um" Dartfoot looked around, then pointed in a random direction. "Gone that way!"

"That way's the docks."

"That way!"

"There's the sheep pens."

"That way!"

"Only a grassy knoll I'm afraid, little lady."

"Ooooh! That way!" she pointed back towards the docks again, with tears beginning to well in her eyes. Cattongue seemed to soften as his shoulders sagged, and he immediately stopped enjoying the teasing.

"Ah look at me, now I've upset you. I'm such a bad man."

"You are! My papa says so!" Astrid flinched, and was surprised to see Cattongue do exactly the same thing.

"But will you allow this bad man to at least do a good thing?" he said, still in his even tone. "What's your name?"

"Darfoot!"

"Do you know what your mama's name is?"

"Mama!"

Cattongue chuckled. Astrid couldn't help smiling. He gave her hair a ruffle with his gloved hands, which succeeded in offending her thoroughly. "What about siblings? Have any brothers or sisters?"

"Two!" was another proudly reply. "Big brother Bifoot and big sister Darbolt!"

"Ah, Dartbolt's your sister!" he said. He stood up, then. "How about I take you home to your Mama?"

"No, I have to follow you because you're a bad man!" Another flinch. Astrid almost felt sorry for how much this little girl's words seemed to affect him.

"But did you get your mama's permission?" Still, she had to admit, he hadn't once lost his patience, and he was remarkably astute in the gentle way he was dealing with the obstinate little girl. She was now looking appropriately cowed and sheepish. The moment her bottom lip started sticking out, he gave her a soothing 'hey' as he put a hand on her head. "Let's tell you what, I'll take you to your Mama, and if

she says you can follow the bad man, then it's ok. But first we need her permission, yes? So let's go see if she lets you."

An unfamiliar feeling welled inside Astrid as he laughed at the little girl's enthusiastic skipping, then she watched him convince her to ride on the dragon's back, dragon which began to twitch excitedly at the prospect, and moved very stiffly and carefully once the three year old was put on him.

"There, like a Viking princess," he said once he made sure she was safely strapped to the saddle. She beamed up at him, having apparently quite forgotten that he was supposed to be a bad man.

"Daddy calls me that!"

Their voices faded out as they moved towards the girl's home, and Astrid moved out into the plaza to watch them go. The unfamiliar feeling in her chest rose again, making her shift uncomfortably. He was a singular man, this Cattongue. He hadn't once lost patience with this child, not even after a long day - two, with a night watch between. He'd been in the smithy all day yesterday, then up at night, and now in the smithy again and teaching youngsters his own secrets with the dragons. Why was he doing so much for Berk when they were already in his debt? Why had he decided to call his debt by doing more for Berk - was he trying to rake his debt up higher? Trying to manipulate them? But what purpose would the manipulation of a little girl have, in an empty plaza with no one to watch? Fleetfoot and Dryleaf weren't even in the council, so sucking up to them was useless. There had been something too simple and genuine in what she'd seen - which meant that this man was simply, honestly, being nice. It made her feel completely and utterly odd.

She suddenly found herself thinking of the pending rain, and how he was going to face that. And whether he was going to eat hot food tonight, or just roast a fish on a dragon flame. She rolled her shoulders uncomfortably at the thought, and hoped Dryleaf would at least invite him to eat with them - and that he wouldn't refuse, if she was gauging his bearing right. Astrid would have to remember to send one of the heirs over with hot breakfast tomorrow, at least, as she had never seen him in the Hall.

The unsettling feeling followed her home, where she went through her chores rapidly, ate with the others, and then retreated to her room. Stoick had insisted that all the heirs sleep downstairs; no one was using Hiccup's room but his betrothed, guests or not, heirs or not. As she was lying down, looking at the ceiling and letting her mind drift to random things before sleep took her, a thought struck, and then glanced away before she could snatch it.

The following morning, however, it would stop her cold as she worked beside Fishlegs. How had Cattongue known with such certainty where everything on Berk and Dryleaf's home was?

He'd only been there for four days, including that day, and most of those he'd spent at the forge, or in the Hall with the council, or in the arena. Maps could be acquired, true, and maybe Hiccup had spoken to him of his home, but maps did not show where individual houses were, nor did they show the sheep-pens, which were due east at the foot of the mountains. And Hiccup would not give out that many

details of his home to a stranger; of that, she was sure. She couldn't â€| _wouldn't_ confront him about it. Not yet, though perhaps â€| she wasn't sure. Perhaps, she would watch, wait. Hunt. He knew Hiccup â€" she had to be careful. She didn't want to mar that well before she could drink from it.

Another thought slapped her in the face. She should have realised right away; known that something didn't add up the moment Berk was sighted. There was no way anyone who had not been on Berk before could know that Troll Peak only added half an hour to the voyage into the main village. But Cattongue had, without any prompt. It made no sense, it was impossible.

Then â€| how?

=0=

Oh yes, Astrid is on the prowl â€|

**Notes: **

1) The word 'chittering' is not a common one, and is a slang in my parts for people (usually girls) chatting in a high pitched, bird-like manner.

2) Thank you to all of you who have left reviews as Guests, as I cannot thank you individually. Thank you also those who have left me notes with fic recs - the truth is, I have not _exactly_ been reccing fics. The ones I quote are stories that have been an influence to this one; sort of like an academic reference note. Still, by all means, let me know of any good fics. I do not like love-triangles, and Hicc/Cami gives me the rashes ... so please take that into account, but otherwise, I'm open!

**3) For anyone who has missed it, the update schedule is Tuesday and Friday, London time. Next chapter will be up on Friday 7th March 2014.
>

12. Day 4 - Morning

**Stoick; a father and a chief.
>

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1_

**Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir**

* * *

><p>Day 4

Morning

Stoick rubbed his eyes tiredly. Gobber had commented on the new white streak in his hair the other day, and now Astrid was looking at him worriedly; he wasn't that old yet to elicit that kind of

mother-henning concern.

But he had to admit, this situation was taxing; he was not used to having his word gainsaid; this is not to say that he never listened to his council's opinion or that he did not often take someone else's suggestion when he found their opinion to be the best option.

It was just that it rankled when this happened consistently, and it didn't help that the one doing it was a foreigner who was not being subtle in his attempts to take over Berk's leadership.

"Sir, I agree that women can take care of the weaving task, but as for the riders, I don't think they should be with them and the children; the village will be better protected if they are elsewhere," Cattongue was saying, looking at the maps of the island spread on the table. The mead hall was empty except for the adults on the council and Astrid as a stand-in for his son; task for which she'd had to abandon her work with the carpenters. It was getting late into the morning, perhaps one hour before noon, and this dratted meeting had already lasted two whole hours of that. Even though the heirs to the other tribes had all gone back to gain some support for the fight that was coming to Berk, leaving Cattongue on his own, things had not gone smoothly. This damned youth could not seem to understand that, debt or not, Stoick was still the chief, and what he said goes_ when it came to Berk's defense.

"Aye, and I tell you that I do not think so," he growled, perhaps too violently, as the people in the room shifted uneasily. Cattongue sighed, raising a hand to rub his chin under his helmet. The spawn of the devil had not removed it even once since he'd come here.

"How do you think we can increase it, then?" Cattongue asked. His tone was even and reasonable, but there was a certain edge to it that spoke of impatience. In a way, despite it being a step back from this boy, Stoick felt dealt with. He was being allowed to expose his opinion, not having it as the last word, by a weed of a boy who thought himself a leader because he could entice a few brainless youths into following him.

Stoick could reach out and twist his neck, with one hand - snap! And there would no longer be a problem on their island. They could simply face this as they always had, like real men and women, like Vikings, and not sniveling children hiding behind plans and trickery. Smart, inventive trickery of the enemy, granted, but trickery none the less. Coward.

But Stoick also knew that was not true; neither was the boy a coward, nor was this situation something they could handle with the Viking way. They'd already tried the one, and the tribe had nearly been slaughtered, and for the other - Stoick was man enough to admit that what he'd seen with his own eyes on that island, and the way this boy had put himself in front of everyone and even his own little troupe of dragon riders on Berk during that battle did not taste of weakness and fear.

Again Stoick had to swallow his anger and comply to the boy as he steered the conversation.

"I don't think that there is enough strength with the common village people. There needs to be more warriors with the children, the old

and the folk who don't fight. Otherwise, even if we vanquish the thing, we will come back to an empty victory. We fight to save the lives of our loved ones, not only for the glory."

Cattongue looked at him, eyes barely catching the torchlight through the mask's eye holes. The rafters gave a warble, and Stoick knew by now that the damned devil from Hel's realm was up there, keeping an eye on this human who had somehow turned it into a faithful friend. For all his seeming intelligence, this man was stupid enough to share his taming methods with the Viking Tribes - he had even managed to turn Astrid into a dragon sympathiser, if her interaction with that nadder said anything.

Stoick felt himself go breathless for a minute. It was as if the earth had been pulled from under him. Berk was never going to be the same after this, he could feel it in his bones; if there was a Berk left to leave for his Hiccup. Odin, he wished Hiccup were here. He had always been smarter at the mouth than anyone in the tribe, and would have had no problem keeping up with this foreigner. Ah, Hiccupâ€¦

"You said that they would be sent to the safe areas as soon as trouble starts. The sentinels should be able to warn us soon enough, and if they are far enough they should be completely out of danger." He held his hand up when Stoick rolled his shoulder. "I am not asking where it is. I understand that you cannot tell me, and I will not put your security at risk, Sir." Irrationally, Stoick felt even angrier at this show of respect. More and more, he felt that he was being manipulated into a corner with polite precision.

"The problem is that as we are now, we do not have enough mounted warriors to take it on during the fight. We have to keep it at bay - that thing's smart, smart enough to mark the ships so it could follow us. When it realizes we have trapped it, it will try to get away, and only another dragon can stop one that size; in our case, many other dragons, with Vikings leading the strategy."

Another warble from the rafters. Damned the thing for proving to be as intelligent as a man (in some Viking's case, Stoick had the distinct impression that the night fury would win a game of King's Table1, if taught the rules).

"If we had more dragons, I could train more warriors to rotate on the attack once it arrives, but we already have too few, and if you take some off the rotation â€¦"

Stoick's face went ruddy and anger rose in one fell swoop. This was it, if it meant dishonour, it meant dishonour, but this slip of a boy was not going to tell him how to manage his defences!

"Anyway," Cattongue went on, rubbing his neck, "The people of Berk take first priority, as you say, and the women can take care of the reeds and of weaving it. We'll just have more to do." He looked up. "You up for that, bud?"

A cheeky growl and a dust ball on fire was his answer. Stoick wasn't sure if they were trusting their lives in the hands of a lunatic or not, but Astrid had actually begun to have conversations with her own damned lizard, and he knew of no one more level headed than that girl.

"Can the ones guarding the safe spot return to battle, once everyone has arrived?" he asked, addressing Stoick directly, and this time Stoick could see Cattongue's eyes very clearly. There was worry there, and a million thoughts. It wasn't the look of a man who was doing it for the thrill, or for the larks, or for the honour of saying they were the one to kill the mother of all dragons. It was the look of a man who was trying to protect people.

Stoick didn't buy it for a moment. He had not yet guessed what the motivations for this boy's actions were, but he would soon. And when he did, he and his men would nip it at the bud.

"No," he answered resolutely. He would not let him have his way in as many ways as he could get away with. His debt with the boy made it so he could not refuse everything point blank; but he wasn't going to make it easy, either. "If the fighters at the front lines fail, the people of Berk need some protection to rely on."

Cattongue rubbed his neck again. "If we fail, there will be precious little anyone can do," he replied, almost sadly. "But you're right; at least we'll have fresh reinforcements in case we need to make a last stand elsewhere."

"It's settled, then. The upper and lower defenses will take care of the machines that are being built. The new recruits will be in charge of the last minute defenses. The rest will go with the most vulnerable."

Everyone nodded. "Are all those going to Troll Peak bathing after they touch anything? It's the most important thing. If we trek the smell to the village â€|" Cattongue rolled his shoulders. There was an uncomfortable pause.

"Well, lost a few bets, myself," Gobber said. "But I have to say, never have the back of my ears been cleaner."

The council actually laughed, a few threw in their own joke about the smell in the smithy having nothing to do with the burning metal. For the first time, Stoick heard Cattongue laughing, if quietly. He looked at the boy sharply - he'd somehow heard that laugh before, but then again, the helmet distorted and muffled most of everything. Still, there was something alarming in that laugh, something that sent the hair on the back of his hand standing. Stoick almost smiled grimly; if it turned out that he was an Outcast sent by Alvin, Stoick would have the greatest pleasure in gutting him while he still breathed.

"We are done, then," Stoick said, cutting off any further mirth. Lightening the mood was needed with the grim prospects in the times ahead, but that didn't mean he didn't have other things to do, as did the rest of them.

"Um, almost," Cattongue interrupted. Stoick levelled him a glare, which he didn't see as he was calling the four-footed devil down.

"Come on, bud, come down - not on the table!" Too late- the dragon shook itself, and looked at Stoick specifically with narrowed eyes. For a few moments it ignored Cattongue, who was trying to get it off

the mead hall council table and maps, but it looked directly at the chief instead. Stoick felt like he was looking into Hel's eyes and believed even more firmly that this creature was not only intelligent, but that it was just as tame as a Viking was tame. It was also issuing a challenge; this beast knew perhaps better than its rider the plans the village had for them, and a rapid death was not something it would give the mercy of. Good; Stoick promised pretty much the same.

Cattongue sighed.

"Not as obedient as it looks, eh boy?" Spitelout said snidely. A few men tittered. Cattongue actually didn't seem to mind.

"He's a friend, not a thrall. Has a mind of his own; a stubborn one too," he replied, folding his arms and directing the last bit towards the dragon. It dropped its lids into a half-glare, and then huffed at the man, but it submitted and came off the table, allowing Cattongue to rummage in the two considerable burlap sacks it had tied to its saddle. "And, here!" He hauled a large number of metal chains onto the table with a sound like falling coins, and then began sorting them, making Stoick realise that they were, in fact, suits of chainmail. He handed the first to Gobber, who grinned at it. Spitelout got the second; he, on the other hand, scowled.

"This would never hold up in battle," he said disdainfully, throwing it down.

"It will. Just because it's light, doesn't mean it isn't strong," was the prompt reply as the boy kept pulling one mail suit from another.

"Ah, this is made with that alloy you favour so much, isn't it boy," Gobber said with a grin, and he actually started putting it on, much to everyone's astonishment. Gobber had always been one to go into battle with whatever he had on at that moment - Stoick could remember one raid where the undies had been scarred into everyone's eyes. "You have to share this with your fellow smith someday, eh? This metal is prodigious."

"Sorry, Gobber," Cattongue returned, handing out more mails, which were being received with more favourable attitudes now that the local blacksmith had given them a tacit approval. "Once this is over, I'll have to live somehow when I leave Berk. Can't go giving my trade secrets up quite that quickly."

Gobber seemed to deflate rather significantly. That metal must really be something to look into. Stoick made a mental note to speak to him later; the interesting qualities of the metal would be another thing on their talk at the other council meeting.

"And here. Sir. Um. This one is for you."

Stoick looked down blankly for a moment as the boy held up a suit of mail towards him. Then he frowned at it angrily.

"I don't see how I would need this," he said, patting his hammer against the one he had always worn. It had grown with him, a gift from his father first, then a symbol of his chieftain duty, adding a plate of mail at a time for every inch he grew in all directions. "I

have my own, and it is enough."

"Oh â€|" Cattongue seemed to deflate. The men around the hall stopped thumbing and wearing their own offerings, looking at him for an example. Ah, well, if his men would be protected â€| but if he could thwart whatever this boy's plan was a little moreâ€|

"Eh Stoick, give it a try," Gobber said with a clinking shrug, and Stoick glared at him the worse; his best friend was not going to side with this slip of a boy!

But then, Stoick knew that Gobber was on his side. He took the mail, and immediately sneered at it, throwing it onto the hall table.

"Spitelout's right, this is useless," he growled, and brought his hammer down on it. There was a silence immediately after, as the chain mail shone subtly in the firelight, undamaged.

"Odin's beardâ€|" Stoick muttered. Then he rolled his shoulders. "Give it to one of my men. I still think my own is all I need."

"Bu-But the measurementsâ€|"

"Eh, we'll adjust it; nothing a few links off here and there won't solve," Gobber said gamely. Cattongue nodded. Stoick proceeded to dismiss the meeting, and all the men began to leave the room, all of them taking the chainmail with them.

"Sir." What did this boy want! "Sir, I am sorry to insist, but this mail will keep you safe. I can guarantee it with my life." Ah, that was a tempting option; but he had already refused, and he did not appreciate being gainsaid. "If you would only try it, in a mock fight, perhaps against" -

"Enough!" Stoick yelled, finally losing his patience. The bellow echoed through the almost empty hall. "I have already spoken, and you will not insist any further." Stoick tamped his index finger against the boy's armoured chest with satisfaction, forcing him backwards. The devil growled, but he ignored it. "Evidently, where you come from, tradition and respect of your elders aren't taught; or perhaps, you were just the unruly student, who had to leave or be driven out of class."

Cattongue's eyes through his mask went cold, and his demeanor changed completely. Stoick felt a rush of satisfaction at having touched a chord.

"Very well, sir. I will be in the forge."

He turned and left. The only people left in the hall had been Gobber and Astrid before the show of force had begun, and when he turned to them, Stoick expected the same fierce pleasure he was feeling himself.

He was disappointed.

"Stoick," Astrid said, "I'm going to speak with him. Odin above, I hope this doesn't put it into his mind to ask for another price, or

let that monster burn all of Berk to a crisp." She left at a sprint. Gobber just shook his head and left, still wearing the clinking armour that made him jingle at every step, and shine mutely in the northern sun once he stepped outside.

Stoick felt the bottom fall out of his stomach. Perhaps, this was the subtle boy's strategy. Win them over with kindness and friendship, become their hero, so that by the end, they would be the ones begging him to stay, and from that, a short step would be to have them begging to lead.

He wouldn't let this nobody take his Hiccup's heritage. No matter what Gobber said, there was still a chance his son would be back. He was still alive and well out there, now they knew. And Stoick just knew that Hiccup loved him, and loved Berk. He would be back, someday, a man ready to step into his father's shoes.

And when he was back, he would have shoes to step into. Stoick would make sure of that. Even if had to kill this boy to do so.

=0=

1 King's table is a board game much like chess which used to be played during the Viking age.

=0=

Poor Stoick, how cruel I am to him. I'd like you all to remember that I love dramatic irony, and that these are short as they are all very important for the particular characters.
>

Many have asked me this, and I couldn't answer till now as I couldn't find conclusive evidence. From what I have managed to find, however, the sign 'Ã**' is pronounced in English most closely with the phoneme 'th'. So the title should read 'Becoming Lifthrasir'; anyone actually from Iceland, please let me know if my research has been accurate. I hate to misinform people.**

13. Day 4 - Afternoon

I do believe that this will catch you all by surprise. And a slightly early update for Em's sake.
>

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1

Becoming LÃ-fÃrasir

* * *

><p>Day 4

Afternoon

Astrid rushed through the busy village, not quite ever catching up

with Cattongue as he weaved through the halls and people bustling around. The fact that he was walking after the dragon, which opened the stream of people like her axe through logs helped him, while she was jostled this way and that by the returning flow of foot-traffic.

He was already banging away at the anvil when she finally reached the forge, back to the door and dragon nudging him gently. He was evidently annoyed, even angry, and she'd only seen that in battle to-date. Astrid gathered another piece of information about him; his work, apparently, was important to him, and a source of pride. He did not like his work to be degraded, and took umbrage when it was. She was one fact richer about him, at least.

And one problem poorer; she had to solve this damned situation before someone they were _in debt with_ decided that just telling them what to do in this crises, while they hadn't expiated the debt yet, wasn't enough. She'd wished to ask subtly about her suspicions, (how did he know Hiccup? How did he know Berk? Could he have been the one Hiccup was speaking to, in the cove?) confront him indirectly, but now she didn't dare. Honestly, what was _Stoick thinking_!

She walked into the forge, trying to be quiet, but the dragon ratted her out right away, turning to look at her and thrilling a greeting "Loki's balls, now thanks to her nadder she knew what a dragon's sounds _meant_.

Cattongue sighed. "Not now, Gobber," he said, and for some reason, it struck a very powerful chord in her chest. There was a familiar note of misery there that reminded her of dragon raids and the repairs that followed them, but also of the sea smell, sooth and charcoal somehow. The feeling was fleeting, and tickled something at the back of her mind that had her holding her breath in an urgent need to remember. But then the dragon warbled again, nudging Cattongue, who looked back, straightened and nodded curtly, and she was forced to let it go.

"Did you need anything, Hofferson?" he asked when she did not speak up. He turned back to the anvil, back even stiffer than before. "I was working on some outfitting for you and your nadder, but if you prefer that Gobber handle your gear, I will understand."

There was note of coldness again. Whatever had been tickled at the back of her mind gave another heave, but even though she scrambled for it, it still slipped through her fingers.

"It's fine," she said quickly, when she took too long to answer again and he turned to peek at her through the helmet. "I mean, if Gobber said it was great, then I believe him." She was surprised to see his shoulders sag, and his tone in the next sentence was almost fond.

"He's some blacksmith, huh?" Hm, Gobber had apparently gotten under his skin? _Smart._

"He really is," Astrid replied with a chuckle in her voice. She sometimes forgot how experienced in all kinds of battles the blacksmith was "she still couldn't shake off the image of the often-silly man she had grown up with, despite his quieter melancholy the past few years. Astrid sat on the bench just under the raid

window, looking out into the village for a few moments. Clouds were blotting the sun out, turning everything a steel, cold colour, and the forge fires became rosier in contrast. A few drops heralded the shower that quickly followed, sending folk scurrying for shelter and clearing the streets outside as it began increasing in strength. Winter really was coming, soon; Autumn was practically at the door. Astrid was not looking forward to another Winter in a hall so quiet and still, she had to admit, not when she was used to the hustle and bustle of her rather big family. Stoick, sometimes, would become so withdrawn she couldn't get a word out of him for days.

"Look," she said with a sigh, turning towards the blacksmith, who seemed to be working on some strange hoops a hand-span wide. "About Stoickâ€¦" She stopped. Because how did she apologise for the chief without apologising? She couldn't really make Stoick seem like an idiot by downplaying the value of his words, but that's exactly what she had to do to _apologise_. Great â€" she should have thought this through.

"It's alright. The chief is the chief. He is already being more accommodating than any other chief I know." Astrid didn't know how she felt about that. Was that a complement to Stoick's level headedness, or was he implying that he didn't hold a candle to the other chiefs? "He is very â€¦ fair."

He'd really had to look for that word. Even the night fury was looking at him with half-lidded eyes that said 'â€¦really?' Astrid would have chuckled if this didn't worry her immensely. It made her go down a road she was not really comfortable with.

"Well, the thing is," she shifted, and the dragon looked at her. Toothless, he was called, she remembered; she was getting a look from him that told her he knew exactly how uncomfortable she was. It didn't make her any less tense. "Stoick really misses his son. You know, Hiccup â€¦ the one you â€¦ met â€¦?"

Her voice faltered when he turned to look at her rather abruptly. A loud peal of thunder made her gaze snap outside as well, and the return of his strong hammering filled up the following silence. Rather than letting it endure, Astrid went on.

"It's been five years since he left, and Stoick hasn't heard word from him in a while, and he's really worried. We all are, really. But it makes _him_ very â€¦ testy." Cattongue gave no reply, and the lightning began to chase itself in the sky, thunder following in loud crashing. Damn it, Thor was mad as Hel's teeth. Possibly at her for being such a coward and not facing the man she was talking to like a real Viking.

"I â€¦ I mean, that was not the impression I got from him." She couldn't stop a flinch, and pretended that it was from the thunder. "I am sorry if this upsets you." And obviously failed to fool him. "He thought that Berk wouldn't miss him much at all. His nickname there was 'Hiccup the Useless', after all."

"He wasn't useless," she hissed, turning angrily towards him. She felt better now that she could be angry at him. "That was just a stupid childish nickname this bonehead Snotlout came up with when he had too much time on his hands and too little brain to come up with something useful to do." He gave a quiet huff of mirth, and Astrid

relaxed marginally, feeling slightly stupid. She was here to repair any damage done, not get angry at him herself.

"Snotlout is â€| rather interesting to speak with," he replied, and there was a quality of amusement in his voice that made her want to snort. "Just this morning before the meeting, he was telling me that you really are about to be engaged to him."

"Oh don't you believe his tripe," she said, angry again â€" and this time feeling safe in planning to crack that idiot's scull. What if Cattongue met Hiccup again and told him something like _that_?

The thought made her stop cold, and the racket Cattongue was making on some new concave metal plate took over the smithy. Did she dare? Yes, now was the time to sip from the well. Cattongue had met Hiccup before, and â€|

"Say," she said tentatively, turning to give her back to the window and face Cattongue completely. A thought, an echo of that cold-eyed glance almost made her stop, but she couldn't place the feeling, so she forged on. "Do you think you'll see him again?" She'd already told Thuggory to pass on a message for her; but if she asked two people, maybe he'd believe it more. Ack, she didn't need to justify her choices with herself! Cattongue had turned to look at her, too. "If you do, would be too much to ask of you, if you told him something from me?"

Cattongue swallowed uncomfortably, and she almost backtracked. But perhaps, if he pledged his word to her, it would tie him to Berk more solidly. She'd be in his debt personally, too, but sometimes, that forged a connection that endured more than any other.

"Why?" he asked. He wasn't going to make it easy. She looked down for a moment, and he continued almost apologetically. "I mean, Thuggory said you were engaged, but I â€| Hiccup never mentioned you."

"Never?" she found that there was a rather sinking feeling in her chest. Cattongue went on even more urgently.

"Ah, I mean â€| I, er, he didn't seem to know. That he was engaged, I mean," Cattongue rubbed his neck uncomfortably. There was a long, uncomfortable silence until the dragon gave what sounded like a chuckle and nudged him with a paw, which made Cattongue swat at him. "Don't you start," he muttered at him. Astrid gave a tired chuckle before leaning on the window jamb, folding her arms and looking down at Cattongue's feet.

"It was arranged, after he left. On his journey, I mean."

"So you want me to tell him to stay as far off as possible, I get it," Cattongue said with a wry snort. Astrid looked up with a glare.

"No!" Cattongue looked up at her, his body language speaking of alarm, so she looked down again and softened her tone. "We had a quarrel. And when he left it just â€| I really owe him an apology, you see."

Coward, she told herself as she turned back to look out the window.

The rain hadn't let up at all. The streets were completely empty now. The silence became utterly unbearable, especially here in the smithy. It was so easy to remember Hiccup here, where she'd seen him every day for so many years, drowning behind a pile of weapons, bantering with Gobber, working late into the night and early in the morning. Her insides gave a roll, and then tried to fold themselves into sharp corners when she thought Hiccup had never mentioned her once with the people he had met while travelling. Had he forgotten them? Or did he think they wouldn't want him to remember them?

Her insides gave another heave; she wasn't sure guilt felt quite like this. Panic welled suddenly up her throat.

"It's my fault he left," she blurted suddenly, looking resolutely into the falling rain. "I said some horrid things to him, things that made him feel there was no place for him in the village." She swallowed stubbornly against the lump in her throat. "I was wrong of course, but I didn't get the chance to â€¦" She'd already said that. She had to get all the important things out; Hiccup had to hear this, and Cattongue could only remember so much. "He was a genius in the smithy, even Gobber can't work on some of the things he's left us. He was â€¦ is kind and he made up for things he wasn't good at in other ways. Berk really needs him back, and, I â€¦"

She didn't know what else she wanted to say, but she couldn't just stop there.

"You know he can draw better than anyone I know? Give him charcoal, and he can put anything on paper. And there are these machines he made and left here, they're amazing. That launcher Gobber gave us the plans for yesterday is his. And this-" She fingered her pendant, and then stopped, going rigid and feeling her cheeks grow hot. What was she doing, telling him these unnecessary things?

"I'll tell himâ€¦" Astrid looked at Cattongue, who was swallowing stiffly. He rolled one shoulder, almost like an effort to shrug gone wrong. "He, um, Hiccup'll know how you feel. I'll make sure of it."

Her heart pounded in her chest as a feeling swelled upwards. She smiled at him gratefully, nearly overcome by the desire to hug him in thanks. That was __**not**__ going to happen. Her body seized up with the conflicting emotions running through her.

"Thank you," she choked out. The urge to leave was suddenly, unbelievably strong. "I, uhâ€¦" The rain had not let up at all. "I will see you at the next meeting."

Coward, she told herself again as she ducked out into the freezing rain.

The very strange feelings in her chest didn't go away.

=0=

Hiccup knew he was being irrational while he pounded on the dragon's ear filters. Stoick didn't know that it was Hiccup, so he wasn't really refusing something his son had made. And yet it stung like a nadder spike all the same. Would it kill him to accept something Hiccup had made, for once? To accept an invention with something

other than disdain and a wrinkled nose, promote the result of hours and hours of thought and toil and sweat to the rest of the tribe? As if to spite himself, he remembered the only time in recent memory when his dad had looked at him with pride; when he thought he'd been bashing dragon skulls in the ring, when really, he'd only been training them.

Stoick would really never see Hiccup, even when he was standing right there, always conscious, in his fear that he'd be discovered, that this word or that mannerism was giving him away, and being proven more and more every day that his father hadn't really known him.

Then Astrid ducked into the smithy and dropped her firebolts, and Hiccup was left reeling.

So, Stoick missed him. Yeah, that was that that was evident, in the way that trolls stealing socks were evident. So Stoick was surly and horrible to guests when he missed a family member; not likely. He'd seen his Stoick be more than hospitable to guests, after his mum was gone. Stoick simply of course he just he

Oh, it didn't make sense. Stoick didn't know it was Hiccup behind the helmet. Did he? Gobber wouldn't have he

No, no. Stoick would have burst in, confronted him. Possibly flung his helmet off, stunned him with a good blow to the head and then tied him up for trial. Or not; was Astrid serious when she said they wanted him back? She did? She didn't know who she was speaking to, evidently. And his Stoick didn't know. But in that case, it made no sense for Hiccup to be so upset that Stoick had refused his gift. The chainmail had worked well in the past, Thuggory's father and Cami's mother both wore variations of it made to order. He'd wanted to do that for his Stoick so much, make sure as many of the people going to battle were as protected as he could kit in the protective metal. And he'd done so many of these chainmails now that one only took him two hours to make Gobber had admitted it took him a whole day to cut the links alone, between his missing hand and his larger fingers.

Gobber had been dogging his every step, shadowing all his work since he'd discovered him. He'd even tried to convince Hiccup to spend the night at the forge instead of the forest, but the prospect of spending the night with the helmet on had pushed Hiccup out into the cold, but private, forest. The disappointment on the blacksmith's face every time Hiccup reminded him that he wasn't here to stay, and that he wasn't the same gangly boy who had left five years ago in one way or the other always ate at the younger smith, but it couldn't be helped.

And yet here he was, being ridiculously hurt that his his father had once again refused something made by his own hand. It was so illogical he'd been getting progressively angrier at himself until Astrid walked in.

And Astrid dear gods, Astrid. Engaged to him; missing him; listing all the things he could do like they were complements and accomplishments. Like she was proud of him in a way that nobody had been since his mother and Gobber. It left him feeling almost queasy with uncertainty.

Toothless nudged him again. At least his best friend was a constant solid presence through this mess. Gods, he should never have come back to Berk.

"This is so messed up," he whispered, and Toothless replied with a nod, a worried warble and a comforting huff of warm air. The rain outside is letting up, and in a way he was glad. He could still see Astrid, walking away from the smithy with steps slower than she should if she was trying not to get wet. Thousands of thoughts began to pass through his brain; she should stay dry, it wasn't healthy. She really should take care of herself more. There was a definite new shape to her face; much less round, but still soft, fooling you to believe that she was just another woman.

Yeah, right. She could nut you with an arrow from a hundred yards away. She'd almost done it to Snotlout once when they were twelve and he wouldn't shut up about â€| well, what she'd almost hit. And if she could _almost_ hit at 12, she could definitely hit at â€| Odin, they were 19 already.

And she was engaged to him. His eyes were still glued to her across the plaza, where she had stopped to take some shelter under the eave of one of the closest halls to the forge. He remembered looking out at her through this very window, longing, learning, wishing, and maybe hoping a little, but he'd never really finished that thought process because it had seemed ridiculous even as a dream. Even now, he knew there was something more behind this arrangement; possibly a way to disguise Astrid moving into the heirdom of the tribe even though she is not related to Stoick by blood.

But it was true, and she was right there, and â€|

His mouth went dry for a moment as Toothless gave a growl next to him. Hiccup knew the meaning of that growl perfectly. Instantly, Hiccup clapped on the armoured shoulder pads he'd removed for comfort and was racing out of the smithy with his dragon into the light drizzle.

Astrid spotted him right away. "What is it?"

He held up a hand to her, looking up at the sky, tense and ready. Toothless beside him was doing the same, eyes moving here and there, resolutely upwards. There was another static moment, then â€|

There, in a gap between the lighter clouds. A red tail-tip; they were waiting for the downpour to stop so that they wouldn't get their heads wet and using the clouds as cover. Smart; but he was _smarter_.

"Perfect," he said, adrenaline beginning to course through his veins as he mounted the equally eager Toothless.

"What?!"

"RAID!" he bellowed into the village, hoping it would carry. He turned to look at Astrid. "Go tell Stoick; get the alarm going! Then call your nadder and get up into the air. Get the net machines along the perimeter of the higher town ready!"

He turned to Toothless, who nodded. He crouched down and tensed as Astrid sprinted towards the warning bell, which was in sight. "It's go time, buddy."

With a screech, they were up. The bell started going before the last droplet ceased falling and the first dragon head whizzed out of the clouds. They found themselves facing an angry night fury.

Villagers were beginning to pour out of wherever they'd taken shelter, armed and ready, judging by the noise. Hiccup was pre-occupied with herding a group of nightmares towards the higher points. The bells faltered, his head glanced almost of its own accord, and he felt gladness blooming to see that Astrid had merely passed on the job to run for her nadder. He realised he'd panicked at the thought of her being hurt.

He filed that for a better thinking time.

He spotted Stoick pouring out of the hall. Toothless blasted a nightmare out of the sky and into a waiting trap, which snapped to trap its wings, and though it fired up, the metal parts held.

"Yes it worked! Now fly to the stairs, buddy, the Hall!"

Toothless landed in front of the chief.

"Hop on!"

"WHAT?"

"No time, Sir! I swear you will be safe! You're needed next to the barns!"

Stoick's expression changed instantly, and he stoutly got into Toothless, who groaned but took off. Avoiding a few streams of fire on the way, Hiccup was pleased to see that the new recruits who had received terrors were doing their job as they raced to positions. Astrid was also up, and she flanked him as they flew at their fastest.

"Hofferson, the nets?"

"Positioned!" she yelled over the wind. He nodded.

"Go there, I'll signal like this!" he waved his arm sharply downwards. "Pull the levers two seconds apart!"

They arrived at the barns, Stoick roaring orders as they passed, even taking a gronkle down with his hammer as they flew; he couldn't help yelling a 'good shot', and he admitted to himself that this was the most fun he'd had with his dad in years. It was a pity so much was riding on it.

The barns were under heavy siege. He didn't quite remember a raid this bad â€" there were certainly more dragons than he ever could remember seeing. Perfect. A nadder spike lodged into his shoulder pad with a thunk and barely penetrated the skin, but he contained the hiss and flew on â€" thankfully Toothless didn't notice; he would pay for it later. Stoick got off before Toothless had even landed, and used his momentum to send another gronkle reeling. Hiccup and

Toothless winced together as the hammer hit and sent a few dragon teeth flying, while Hiccup took the chance to get the spike out of his shoulder pad, and was about to get back up when he noticed a nightmare trying to sneak up behind the chief, keeping to the shadows.

"Oh no you don't!" He hissed at it violently, blood boiling as Toothless gave a warning growl that alerted it to being caught. With a roar of its own it launched at Stoick, and Hiccup threw himself off Toothless, parrying a blow meant for his father's back with his pride and joy; the sword Smoulder.

Stoick turned in alarm to find himself back to back with Cattongue. The expression on his face as he took a second to absorb the scene was priceless to Hiccup.

"It's OK, I've got your back!" he yelled, fulfilling a lifelong dream, before his instinct and a roar from Toothless made him duck, taking his father with him as a stream of fires rose over their head. Hiccup caught all the viscous offshoots with his smoking sword. Before the nightmare could finish its fireball, and therefore retreat and attack again, Hiccup passed his sword to the right hand, slipped his left arm backwards into its protective casing and swung, catching the dragon in the lower jaw and sending it reeling. Throwing Smoulder into his left hand again, he waved it in an arch, forcing the dragon to retreat or have its teeth shorn off, and it found Toothless circling it from the back.

The nightmare turned to give him a furious look and attacked. Hiccup had dealt with his fair share of wild dragons that either couldn't or refused to be tamed, at least at first. He nimbly leapt out of the way, staying on his feet as he brought Smoulder down in a wide arc that caught the nightmare's wing. There was an instant spark, and both the dragon and the sword caught fire.

"Throw that away, use this!" Stoick said, about to throw a mace his way, but then stopped when he saw the flames around the sword rise higher, but the weapon remain undamaged, and the guard over Hiccup's hands keeping him safe.

Hiccup gave his dad a smirk. "Smoulder's a special one." His father just stared, and Hiccup could have burst with pride.

The nightmare, on the other hand, seemed to be panicking that it was set on fire before it was ready, and attempting to put itself out in patches at a time. It roared as soon as Cattongue darted in again, and relit all the areas the dragon had managed to snuff out. As it tried to retreat Toothless hissed at it, and soon three other fighters as well as Stoick were surrounding it cautiously.

A panicked look came over its eyes and Hiccup chuckled a yell and ran forward to catch its focus; it was frantic now, so this would be dangerous. The nightmare howled and lunged to bite him in half, and he flung himself underneath its neck. Rolling and coming up behind its head, he brought the sword down hard on the back of its skull, a spot behind the horns he knew knocked them out right away. It slumped bonelessly to the ground, moaning in pain, and the fires on its body began to abate quickly.

"Incoming!"

Hiccup looked up as a new wave of dragons began to descend onto the island as new alarm horns began going off, and he growled, looking at his father and Toothless.

"Sir!" he called, almost helplessly. Stoick seemed to understand.

"We can handle things well enough here! Go!" He yelled, bringing his hammer down on a nadder's skull as another two warriors held it by the wings and tied them together, while another two tied the nightmare he'd defeated down. With a reluctant nod, Hiccup put his sword out as he trotted towards Toothless, keeping his eyes on his father for as long as he dared before he hopped onto his best friend again.

They were back up into the sky within moments, and they began circling the island, taking out as many dragons as they could with a deathly fast surprise blast, to the tail or leg, which sent them towards nets or steel traps waiting beneath. A few nadders and a pack of gronkles suddenly started following and attacking him, and he swooped up, Toothless knowing what to do without word or hesitation as they herded _them _instead with blasts and sonic dives towards an area where, hopefully, things had been set up according to plan. He directed Toothless to hide in a smoke column as he held his breath, looked around frantically, and finally Hiccup spotted what he needed most.

Fishlegs was with the gongs, having wheeled them to the edge of the cliff facing the village. Three of the kids where there â€" Gustav, Dartfoot and Nuthead. Almost everything was ready.

Diving back to the smithy, he quickly got the filters, shooting back up as quickly as he could and blessing Toothless's natural speed. Every dragon with a rider got a pair fitted over their ears, and then â€" making sure to shoot some stubborn gronkles and zipplebacks out of the sky on the way â€" they tore it to the field where the two girls â€" Hilda and Helga â€" had been instructed to take their Whispering Deaths. Toothless, ever uncomfortable with this species, hedged as they landed.

"Ok girls. Now, like we practiced."

Both girls turned to their dragons and started twirling their index finger and yelling instructions, and both Whispering deaths began to tunnel two holes into a pit they had dug earlier before the council meeting, under the pretence of training.

"Stop when you reach the water! Dig another tunnel to escape through!" he called after the two subterranean dragons. He gave the two girls a nod, and then handed them each a sack of dragon nip. "Make sure to stay upwind, and to have your dragons behind you when you throw this, understand?" He exchanged a look with Phlegma, who he'd left in charge of them; she nodded determinately.

Hiccup shot up again instantly. He hadn't yet managed to make the facial protection for the dragons, but this would have to do. Toothless, as always, could read his mind before the thoughts finished forming, and they were shrieking towards the large cluster of dragons by the barn.

The fighters were barely holding up. Hiccup's stomach rolled in a way flying with Toothless had never accomplished when he saw Stoick with blood running down his head while he fought.

"Game's up," he growled, and his companion snarled with him. They began whizzing at breakneck speed, shooting dragons out of the sky and into awaiting nets and traps. The dragons naturally began to try to get out of their way, and thus allowed themselves to be herded. Astrid rose next to him on her nadder, shooting fire at escapees. "Put the filters on her ears!" When Astrid complied, he put the metal band with the warm yak-fur-insulated cups on Toothless's ears, and took a large yak-bell from his saddle, ringing it savagely.

Gustav answered, and moments later, loud, sonorous clanging began to reverberate through the village. With Toothless' help, Hiccup guided Astrid's nadder to land, and then shot up again,

"Vikings clear! Sir!" He was by Stoick again. "Sir, are you alright!" he had no time to ask, but he couldn't help it.

"A scratch!" Right. Hiccup knew he'd say the same if his guts were hanging around his neck like a garland. _But they had no time_.

"Get the men clear! They won't be safe!"

"GET CLEAR!"

Hiccup almost wished he'd worn his own ear filters. Toothless looked at him with a smug snicker. But it worked. The human warriors began to filter away, while the dragons caught in the acoustic blast began to falter.

"Ready, bud?" No need for an answer; they were up again, the filters holding up as Toothless could shrug off the effects of the massive dishes of metal being banged on by the kids, while the other dragons began to falter and fall out of the sky. Those that did find themselves at the receiving ends of shields and hammers "he was glad to see the people of Berk following orders and not killing the stunned creatures.

Hiccup, Fishlegs and Astrid (who had come back up! So much for helping her land!) began herding the dizzy and panicked dragons towards the chosen area which, according to his calculations, would yield them the best results. He swooped in as a pack of terrors tried to take Fishlegs down, and used a shrill mouth-whistle to disperse them. Astrid had taken to flying like a natural, and a corner of his mind wished he had more time to admire her astride a dragon. As soon as he saw that they had most of the raiders flapping wings and almost hitting each other within the designated area, Hiccup didn't dally. He called for Fishlegs and Astrid to get clear. Now for the coup de grace.

Hiccup flew to the hilltops, cutting the air with his arm. Astrid had obviously transmitted the signal. Massive nets rushed into the air, capturing a large amount of the dragons who they had herded into range. With a satisfying thud, Hiccup watched the wreathing mass of reptilian prisoners landing into the Whispering Death's pit.

"HELGA, HILDA, NOW!"

There was a rumble. The pit, which he'd made sure to have the 'practice' Whispers dig below sea level on one side, filled with water, causing the dragons to shriek and cry out in alarm and terror. Once he was sure that all of them had been wet, he bellowed out again, and the two little girls started jumping up and down. The Whispering deaths emerged further downhill, water gushing behind them. The pit emptied.

"Girls, the grass!"

The panicked dragons â€" some who were at the bottom of the netted piles half drowned and moaning pitifully, began the quiet and calm down as the girls threw dragon nip down at them. Making sure the stay downwind, Hiccup landed, peering into the pit to see the damage and conquest.

There were seventeen nightmares, thirteen gronkles, fifteen nadders and ten zipplebacks between the three nets they'd launched successfully, and this at a glance. Some â€" probably the ones at the bottom â€" were going to be injured. Hopefully not too badly. He hoped none of the poor creatures had died. He hoped no one on Berk had been hurt.

"They're leaving!"

"They're off! They're going away!"

"They didn't take any sheep!"

"Nor the yaks!"

"Or the fish either!"

Hiccup looked up at the retreating tails grimly. He wished they could have captured them all. If only the others hadn't gone back to their Islands to get reinforcements today. He wasn't sure how much of its strength that monster had regained, but he feared for the returnee's lives.

If that spawn of Loki was strong enough to call the dragons to her again, and send them out for the food she needed to heal, then she couldn't be too weak, already.

A dragon landed next to him. Astrid hopped off, stopping to help Stoick down, and both of them looked grimly down at the dragons in the pit.

Hiccup looked up with fierce satisfaction at his father. One of his plans had worked. In Berk. Adrenaline wasn't the only thing responsible for the surge of pride in his chest.

"It seems we no longer have a problem of how to divide the dragon riders between defence and attack, Sir," he said. Toothless beside him gave a rumble, obviously feeling Hiccup's elation and sharing it through contagion.

"It â€| it seems not," came the tight reply as he looked fixedly down at the calm, near snoozing dragon mass. Hiccup was going to need a lot more dragon nip. Lots and lots more. "You can train all

these?"

Hiccup nodded sharply. "Starting now. The sooner the better. I will need all the men and women willing to ride here within the minute. We need to see to the injured dragons and Vikings, and then starts the hard part." He looked at Astrid, who was glancing at him wide-eyed and â€ he looked at the pit. "We have to get the Vikings and dragons in the air, together, as soon as possible. They have to bond." A smirk stretched across Hiccup's face, unseen behind the mask. "And then, when _she _comes for Berk, we'll be ready."

"Ah â€ Aye." Hiccup looked at his father, startled at the agreement and tone similar to his own. Hiccup realised with a jolt that he, himself, had had bloodlust in his voice, the same his father had breathed. A glance at Astrid showed her still staring at him with wide eyes as if she was seeing him for the first time. "Berk won't fall to the likes of that dragon."

Hiccup nodded. Then he rolled his shoulders, and began yelling instructions. Stoick followed suit, most of the orders complementing his own. For the first time in a long time, something inside Hiccup clicked, but he did not have time to stop to think about it when he ran over to help his father get some logs off a collapsed Hall, haul away dragons that had not fallen into the pit, complement the kids and give them new tasks ("Go put more grass in the pits! Put it on the dragons in the traps! See if they are injured! Tell me if they are!"), and even talking to Gobber, Fishlegs and the other artisans who were trying to crowd him for an explanation of the machines.

There was simply too much to do.

=0=

"Keep them on the nip. Is there enough to go around?"

'Aye's answered the boy in a tired chorus, but everyone was ready with their hands, pitching in with hauling the dragons out of the nets, the younger recruits flitting about to keep everyone supplied on nip. Stoick put down the log he'd just dragged, and suddenly, his ears whistled.

"Sir, are there any Vikings injured?"

Stoick stood and stared.

"Sir?"

This shook him out of the stupor that had come over him to blink at the boy, who was still looking at him while he turned to bark something at someone every few seconds. Stoick rolled his shoulders, trying to grasp enough of the situation to reply, but there was nothing he could think of over the whistling in his ears.

This boy â€ who was this boy? He had repelled the attack so completely and effectively that the dragons had taken nothing even though that was one of the worst attacks he'd ever had the mind to remember. He had faced down a nightmare almost on his own and won without injury on either side.

Cattongue turned to Astrid, who waved Svensen over and muttered a few things to him. Then there was a panicked call of his name, and he felt himself stumble. A shoulder was placed underneath his, then another, larger one on the other side. His sight winked in and out, and when he could focus his eyes again, there was Svensen under his left arm, and Cattongue under his right.

"You took a blow to the head." Yes, yes he had. He remembered that damn nadder's tail suddenly coming out of nowhere right for his axe-arm. He'd ducked, but in the wrong direction. And â€| was that Hiccup's voice, somewhere behind him, barking at everyone to get clear, and damnit, get the healer! Or was it 'where's the healer'?

"Ah, Hiccup," he muttered "you forgot where the healer is?" and the step between Svensen and Cattongue faltered.

"Sir," Cattongue said. "We are taking you to the healer. Please hold on till there!"

"Damn it to Hel's realm!" There was a roar and a crashing sound. Stoick turned to look automatically, but all it did was send him reeling, and bile rose to his throat.

"Loki's shit," someone growled. Was that Hiccup? It was strange and muffled, but the blood in his ears seemed to be doing a lot of that. When had his boy developed a Viking's tongue?

"Cattongue, one of them's gotten out! We need yer arse there!"

"But Stoick!"

"I'll take care o' that! Go!"

Stoick felt himself be jostled, a knobblie, wider shoulder slipped under his right armpit, and he tried hard to focus on the retreating back of whoever had been there before.

"Come on, you old stubborn, boar-headed Viking," Gobber said gamely, and he was hauled away.

"Where's Hiccup gone?" he asked, his stomach roiling again as he realised he couldn't hear his voice well anymore.

"Dunno, my friend, but I know where you are going. Now come on!"

Stoick tried desperately to understand why it was essential for him to keep thinking and asking and walking after who had been under his arm, but he simply couldn't put one foot in front of the other and think at the same time.

=0=

Snotlout had fully intended to get his hands on that nightmare first â€" show them all how it was really done, and remind them all that he was Berk's new promise. But that stupid foreigner had arrived before him â€" hell, people had been calling for him as soon as the stupid dragon got loose.

And he came in, flying the stupid beast of a dragon, looking all heroic. Waved his arms around, did some funny thing with his hand, _rubbed his nails on its nose_, like a May Day daredevil performer, inches from those mad teeth. Then a grab of horns, a brief tug, and the huge thing was purring up at the stupid foreigner like some demented animal.

Snotlout hated, _hated_ that stupid foreigner, and how all the other people of the tribe came to circle him cautiously, and how he simply held out his hand to calm the nervous nightmare as they did. How Hoark ended up petting it on the head and brushing some spikes off its hide, and how the nightmare licked him gratefully, and Hoark began leading it away like an obedient wolf of Odin.

It had nothing to do with the fact that his stupid female nightmare hadn't once obeyed a single order he'd given it, or that it had flown up into the fray and helped the troops without Snotlout, or how Snotlout had ended up with only a few bruises and one terror to show for his courage and prowess while stupid Cattongue saved the day; and now there he was, talking with Astrid cheek-to-cheek, like they were lovers, and â€| _what_?

Fury rose in Snotlout's head, and he edged forward, circling one of the halls to come closer to those two.

"It's just a scratch, nothing serious,"

"That's for me to judge," Astrid hissed back at him. Snotlout peeked around and saw Astrid holding fistfuls of Cattongue's armour while he flexed his right arm.

"Damn it all, I don't need this right now, Hofferson," he growled at her, and she punched him on the right bicep â€" what was _supposed_ to be one, anyway. Cattongue was as uselessly thin as his coward cousin. And whiny; did he have to gasp that badly for a love tap? Damn Hel's teeth, that had better not _be_ a love tap!

"Let me see." That was Astrid's no-shit tone. Cattongue seemed to know that too, and he let her fiddle with his armour until his shoulder plates and right-arm coverings were off. Snotlout starting getting rather distracting mental images as he watched her hands run across his back and shoulders and chest and arm â€| "Nadder spike?"

"Barely penetrated. Seriously, it's nothing."

"They all say that, and then you start losing arms and legs," she hissed back at him. She squeezed his shoulder. Cattongue bit back a cry and faltered. Astrid jumped up and supported him. There was a sudden tension between them as she held him up and his left hand gripped her shoulder. Snotlout held his own breath as they seemed to hug for a moment (imagine that, hard-as-nails Astrid _hugging_ anyone, ha!) before they straightened.

"Don't argue, you're coming with me to the healer," Astrid barked.

"The dragons, the Villagersâ€|"

Astrid gave him a strange look. She turned to look at the gaggle of

moving Vikings, making sure to keep a firm grip on Cattongue like he was a child " which made Snotlout snicker - and spotted the lucky bookworm carrying a number of logs for repairs (because the dragons hadn't taken anything, but they'd sure wrecked whatever they could find).

"Fishlegs! I'm taking him to the healer " can you and Meatlug take over until Stoick and this one get patched up? You need to find Spitelout for me and let him know, is that alright?"

"Leave it to me, Astrid!"

She turned back to Cattongue, and Snotlout wished more than ever that he could see that hideously scarred face of his at that moment, being completely bullied by a woman (even if it was Astrid). Snotlout began to snicker again, but apparently Cattongue didn't like to be bullied much either.

"I'll go with you on one condition," he told her as she tried to pull him after her and he stood firm. The idiot at least could stand, it would seem. His dragon came up beside him, as if not having the same faith that he would. Still, Snotlout felt a lick of envy as the black dragon obeyed him without words and sat down.

"What do you want?" Astrid asked impatiently.

Cattongue rummaged in the dragon's saddlebags and out came what looked like a bear fur coat, almost like the one Stoick wore. He draped it around Astrid, his right hand moving clumsily but still efficiently enough. Snotlout curbed the wish that his arm would fall off " it was un-Viking like. Better to fight Cattongue at full strength " that was already pretty puny next to his own, all told " and get greater honour in the sound crushing of his opponent.

"You got soaked through in the rain. We need all our warriors at their best " a couple got clobbered, and Stoick was injured today; we can't afford any more of this village's greatest fighters to go down. Especially taken by illness when it can be avoided."

The wish for Cattongue's arm to fall off reasserted itself when Astrid blushed. Astrid Hofferson did not blush, not unless she was so mad at you that your head was going to meet her axe. But she was only blinking up at that stupid foreigner like he was a ray of sunlight in the deep Winter. And whatever for? Snotlout had complemented her fighting abilities several times, told her she looked like she could take on an oak tree and win, and he'd offered to take care of her and do things for her before. Astrid had never given a favourable response; this upstart comes along and there she goes, blushing, even as she dragged him off and clutched the cloak to keep it on.

Snotlout nixed his initial plan to find his father before Fishlegs and be the one to tell him what was going on, and decided that he was going to keep an eye on those two. Clenching his fists and being as stealthy as he could, he walked after them.

=0=

**This is, in fact, what the shorter chapters were leading up to.

Hiccup has been a busy, busy man; the various shots of him teaching kids and in the forge were all clues to the things that came together here. And of course, lots of Hiccup love and confusion. I hope you enjoyed it.**

**I am sorry that I have not been answering reviews. I'm afraid that I will no longer be able to do that; my schedule just got busier, as I got chosen to give a paper at a conference. That's all I needed!
Yey! ^-^ /sarcasm
>

**Updates take place Tuesdays and Fridays. This story is completed. There are around 8 chapters to go.
>

14. Day 4 - Evening

Please enjoy.

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1_

**Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir**

* * *

><p>Day 4

Evening

Heather was really tired, and her poor Clover was going to collapse, but by the time they arrived in Berk, they realised from the beehive of activity that something â€" something big â€" had gone down.

"Oh, no, don't tell me we missed the _fun_," Cami moaned. They had reunited with the Bog Burglar heir while they flew in towards Berk, together with half a dozen fighters from Freezing. Heather didn't know what difference they would make, but she hoped they'd at least make a dent larger than the heirs had made last time.

"And Bloodthirst was all primed up for battle, too!" Heather's eyes rolled skywards involuntarily. Asgard, she loved her husband, she really did, but sometimes he was so melodramatic she almost clobbered him. And really, he couldn't think of a better name than that for their wedding axe? She wasn't sure if she should laugh or feel insulted.

"I swear, if Hiccup started the party without us, there's going to be Hel's wrath to pay!" Cami bellowed, echoed by her Bog warrior women. Cami had, against advisement, told everyone who Hiccup was. Heather wished she could reach over and choke the woman; subtlety and strategy were not her strong suits, apparently. Heather was never happier that she hadn't been born a stubborn Viking. At least she knew the Bog women knew how to keep a secret better than any other when it benefited them.

"If the battle came to Berk, there was little he had to do with it," Heather said, trying to spare the poor man any embarrassment Cami was

ready to dole out, not to mention unnecessary rowdiness to add to this mayhem. As they landed, Heather looked worriedly at her poor Clover, momentarily distracted by the grateful gargle her nadder made; they had come from Freezing with no stops, after only a few hours of sleep as they went all over the island with the Chief, who was preparing for winter and had little mind for anything else. They had been lucky that Thuggory had convinced him to spare five warriors in the name of diplomacy and keeping the treaty with Berk. But at least, for all that, their fighters were riders; five more trained dragons could make a difference.

Cami and her Bog sisters dismounted Sting, who curled up with a hiss. Apparently, her dragon wasn't the only one who was tired " not a good thing. Still, Clover seemed to have blustered up some energy somewhere as a familiar blue nadder came up, initiating the greeting dance.

"Hoy! Welcome back!"

Heather slyly watched Cami's grin go wider as the male Thorston twin trotted up, shirt helpfully removed as he lugged a few planks around.

"You missed the party." His grin got bigger as Cami's sank to her boots. Heather could have slapped herself in the face. "We had a _massive_ dragon raid. Some of the old folk are calling it the biggest one in the history of Berk since Madguts the Horrible chased out the terror colony in the mountains."

Cami let out a long wail. "Where there explosion?!"

"Like you wouldn't believe! Look at that, our hall is still smoking, and the _Great Hall_ got a couple of holes in it! But then we whipped out this awesome strategy Cattongue came up with, and bam! Now we have dragon prisoners! Like, a _baggillion_ of them."

"Wow," Heather told Thuggory in a whisper. "I didn't think he knew words longer than two syllables."

"And Cattongue is going to teach us how to _ride them_." Heather was doing her utmost, but was not able to keep herself from snickering. "I want one that makes things _blow up_, but he says Zipplebacks need two riders, and my stupid sister just had the baby. Which totally means she can't _fly_. Which is awesome because I can rub it in her face and she has to go with the 'women and children' instead of coming with me blowing things up. But then _I_ can't blow things up!"

Cami punched him chummily. "We'll find you another dragon that's destructive enough, I tell you. Where's that scallywag Cattongue's gone?"

"With Astrid." She saw Thug's eyebrows shoot up, and Cami's grin split into a leer. Uh-oh! "Got banged up big, apparently, and so did the Chief. From what I heard, Astrid hauled the both of them to the healer by the ear."

"And I missed that?" Cami sounded mournful. And about to get into mischief. Heather rolled her shoulders, looked at her roosting nadder gargling at his, apparently, flame. Baby nadders would be on the way

or she was a virgin. And _other _kinds of babies.

"Come on, love birds," she sighed, grabbing Cami's ear and snapping her fingers so that her dragon and her husband would follow her. "Let's go see what Cattongue's got himself into."

=0=

Astrid sighed long and hard as she sat down on the cushioned bench beside Ruffnut.

"Here, take her!"

And promptly found herself with a wriggling bundle of tiny arms and legs and tiny wails and hiccups. Another sigh again, rocking the child, who stopped crying probably purely from being set into a new pair of arms.

"Long day?" Astrid asked lightly. Ruffnut huffed and nodded. The taller blonde had her hair in disarray, bags under her eyes, and looked ready to fall asleep.

"Stupid raid woke her up. And then she wouldn't stop crying from all the noise." Ruffnut gave a long moan. "She's going to resemble her father, I just know it. She should have been cackling evilly through the lovely destruction, with things going up in flames!"

Astrid gave her shoulders a good petting as she tried not to laugh. "You'll train it into her, don't worry."

"Yeah, just like Stoick trained Hiccup to hold a mace." Astrid and Ruffnut winced simultaneously. "Sorry."

"It's fine."

Little Woodnut gave a gargle, reaching up and tugging at Astrid's hair.

"Well, she's got a good grip."

"Don't remind me. My nipples are going to fall off." Astrid scrunched her nose, and Ruffnut only avoided a good punch in the face because Astrid's hands were too full. Another tug made her look down, and she found Woodnut sucking on the ends of her braid, endlessly fascinated by the fur on Astrid's clothes and valiantly reaching for it. The child's large blue eyes blinked up at her, and Astrid felt a tug in a completely different place.

Oh Freya have mercy, she _was_ getting old if she was looking at babies and wondering. Thor forgive her for ever doubting her mother's words. Speaking of whomâ€|

The Hofferson matriarch was ambling towards them, weaving through the people in the Great Hall with practiced ease. Once she sat on Astrid's other side with a sigh, Ruffnut reached across and took one of three tankards of mead she was carrying.

"Well, one of them was for the husband, but you're welcome to it as that big lug got stuck playing King's Table with Cattongue at the sick bay," she laughed, taking a swig from hers. Astrid took her own

mug of warmed alcohol, careful to keep it out of the waving reach of tiny arms and hands. "Looking to practice for our future chief, ah, daughter?"

Astrid rolled her shoulders uncomfortably and fought down a blush, but couldn't help smiling. Her mother had never minced words, and was a practical kind of Viking woman who had raised a family of eight, always helped her and supported her through her rough patches and difficult challenges " in training, and in the house. Learning how to mend a hem would never have been possible without her mother's calloused, patient hands guiding her through her messy stitches into something that resembled domesticity. And the cooking " |

Woodnut blew bubbles and gave a high-pitched laugh that left her blinking. Brunhilda snorted and waved the mead at the child, who started cackling again.

"There, see? And you were worried she didn't resemble you enough," Astrid laughed as Ruffnut gave a tired version of her usual deviant smirk.

"Thank Asgard. I wouldn't know what I'd have done if she had her father's tolerance," she said. "So Brun " the man's stuck in the sickbay for any reason?"

Astrid realised that she had to be much more tired than she thought if she hadn't connected the potential reason for her dad being in the sick bay. Worry slithered up her back, but her mother was already waving Ruff off.

"Nothing his hard bones can't take. Dislocated his shoulder, but good ol' Goethi popped it back like a butter rod in its bucket. Arm's in a sling and all, but he'll be right as rain in two days, I'll warrant. If he doesn't go liftin' any of the things because 'it's nothing', tha' is," she ended with a snicker. The two younger girls joined in the chorus.

"Or 'It's just a scratch'," Astrid offered.

"Or 'It'll go in a minute' when he just hammered his own hand," Ruffnut added, making them all laugh harder with a fond imitation of Fishlegs holding up a pained and bruised thumb. Woodnut gargled and giggle through imitation, and for such a young child, wiggled around energetically enough. Astrid hoisted her up to avoid any slipping, and the babe gripped onto her tunic and gnawed at it the moment Astrid supported her head.

"Don't know what gets into their heads, sometimes," Ruff continued.

"You're assuming there's anything in there, dear." Another bout of laughter. "Well, daughter, how's the house going?"

"Fine. We had no damage, so I'll have to leave early to visit Stoick at the healer's and make sure the heirs have bed rushes, but I get a night off tonight. Everybody else thought the same thing though," she waved at the full hall. The poor barmaids had their hands full trying to make sure there was enough mutton to go around and mead to wash it down.

"After a raid like that, nobody had time to put the pot on the fire today. But for all the halls they broke, that Cattongue pulled a fast one enough â€" there wasn't a single chicken stolen!"

Astrid smiled. "I know. He spotted the raid first â€" I was passing by the smithy when he came rushing out yelling about the raid," she suddenly felt the need to justify herself. Her mother seemed to have noticed, but Astrid wasn't surprised; mothers, and hers in particular, knew everything. "Next thing I knew, he was barking at me to sound the alarm, then everything went to Hel's realm in Loki's handbasket."

"Damn, to have missed it! I envy you, stupid single woman," Ruff grumbled, and the place Astrid liked to smother in her chest gave another pull. She frowned thunderously at her, but her mother got there first.

"Single she's not, deary. We got a handsome price from the chief for her, and once Hiccup's back, she'll make him a good wife. She'll make him a good mother too, I'll say. She seems to be keeping this baby more than you are," Brunhilda laughed again, her eyes sparkling with mischief, and Ruff childishly poked her tongue out at her. "Show that to your husband, dear, he'll know what to do with it." Ruff's yelp was almost worth the awkward moment as soon as her mother's words sunk in.

"On that cheerful note," Astrid said, standing and handing Ruff her daughter, who immediately began trying to pull off her long braids. "I'd better go see what the damage is to the men of the hour, then." She hoisted the cloak up, tying it off with some leather strips she always had in her pocket. Unfortunately this caught her mother's sharp eye.

"That one of Stoick's?" she asked, too casually for it to be an innocent question. Astrid squared her jaw, wondering suddenly why this felt like an invasion of her privacy. Ruffnut's prying eyes may have had something to do with it.

"No," she said defiantly. She had nothing to hide, and therefore would not lie about this. "I was soaked through with the rain. Cattongue gave me this after the battle to avoid a sickness. I will give it back once I am at the Goethi's hut."

"Hmm," her mother said, and Astrid knew just from the inflection and the tone that she was screwed â€" though she didn't yet know why. "Well then, I have to go pry the husband away from that board before he starts putting good house money where his drunk mouth is. Don't cut that Cattongue boy as a grifter, but one never knows." She stood, towering over Astrid still. The firm grip she took on Astrid's shoulders was reassuring, but also inflexible. They exited the hall quietly, the cold night swallowing the noises from the hall as soon as the great oak doors groaned shut.

"So daughter, how's the chief treating you?" her mother asked, deceptively good-natured and innocent in her first approach. Astrid wasn't fooled, she knew her mother was aiming for something, but she didn't yet know what, so she couldn't head her off.

"Well, as always," she answered with a sigh as they trudged towards the higher parts of the village. A light snowfall began to feather

down on them, making both women huff in simultaneous annoyance. "This is going to make hauling those dragons around easier," Astrid went on grouchy.

"Well, we could always ask your Cattongue whether it's a good thing or not," her mother interjected.

"Hmm, he seems to know quite a bit about the dragonsâ€¦" Astrid stopped walking when her mother's insinuation registered. "Wait â€¦ what?"

"Daughter," Brunhilda started, but Astrid cut her off.

"What on earth are you thinking!" Her cheeks had caught fire despite the dropping temperatures. "He gives me a cloak - which I took because he was being a man and wouldn't go to the healer's, by the way! - and you start making comments like that. My own mother!" She began trudging forward furiously.

"Daughter." Astrid stopped despite herself and turned to look at her mother. The look she was getting made her feel knee-high, ghosts of blonde plaits brushing her shoulders as she tried to hide her dad's broken hatchet. "I will not judge you, Astrid, nor am I angry with you." ...What? Astrid blinked as her mother's rough hand brushed against her still-flushed cheek. What? "I know that when you proposed this arrangement, you hadn't seen yourself on your own for so long - or perhaps you had, the life of the shield maiden had still been attractive to you five years ago. But that changes as you grow older and your friends start telling you the joys of the wedding bed."

Ok, her mother couldn't be serious.

"Mother!"

"And," her mother went on, giving her a look that shut her up automatically. She regretted it three seconds later. "I will admit that that Cattongue has some arse. Oh, reminds me of your father's tight buns when we were only just married."

"Ok, ok!" she said, waving her arms around, causing her mother to laugh uproariously.

"Right, I've made my point, I reckon," she said with a wink, throwing her arm around Astrid's thinner shoulders and hugging her into her side. "Just remember, darling; be discrete, if you must, and make sure to come to me for the teas, if you do."

"I'm not hearing this," she mumbled, feeling her cheeks flame up as her mother frogmarched her on, laughing at her expense.

The trip up to the Goethi's hut was a suffering of her mother's laughter and boots crunching in the newly fallen snow and worrying about all those with a broken hall sleeping in the Great Hall tonight to distract herself. Unfortunately, her mother's words kept ringing in her head as they entered the hut, wafts of warm air swallowing them whole, even though both women were left blinking at the scene before them.

Cattongue and her father were sitting at a wooden table on one side of the room, and Astrid's father was slapping his knee and demanding

a rematch uproariously, while Stoick and Gobber - the chief with a sizable bandage about his head - were laughing heartily and placing bets. Cattongue was holding his free hand up, the other in a sling, and Toothless was lying at his feet, looking bored, so much so that the dragon shot up and trotted to her with a bump of his head to Astrid's chest the moment they entered. Her mother snorted and walked in.

"Sir, I really don't need three barrels of mead!" Cattongue was saying, half-apologetic and half panicking. He turned to see where his dragon had gone and stood, only to be dragged down again by Gobber, who grabbed the back of his shirt and sat him back, slapping him on the back. Toothless trotted back in, looked at the board and gave a growling laugh at his rider, nudging him with a smile.

"I knew it, the dragon can play King's Table," Stoick growled irritably. Astrid closed the door and walked into the room, noticing that all the men were nursing a mug of mead. The Goethi herself was perched next to her fire pit, also holding a mug, and snickering circumspectly.

"If the rider taught the beast, then we have no chance!" Hacknee said with a guffaw. Brunhilda sighed.

"Have you been sampling the 'medical' alcohol again, scallywag?" her mother asked her father affectionately, twacking his head. Astrid snorted as her father gave a whine typical of his drunken state and the healer was simply snickering knowingly, her boned staff gangling as she tottered on her seat. Obviously the men had been given mead to deaden the pain. In her dad's case, it deadened his brains.

"Eh, leave 'im alone, he's just been soundly beaten, _six times_, " Gobber sniggered into his mug hand.

"And now I owe him three pieces of silver since he won't take the mead, woman, so don't go emasculating me," her father grumbled. Astrid rolled her eyes and gently took the mug from Stoick, shooing Gobber off the pallet so that Stoick could rest, and catching the healer's eyes to make sure she was doing the right thing. With a nod of approval from her, Astrid smiled at the larger man and made sure he was comfortable before she covered him. It was so strange to see him out of his armour and trapping, and with his hair undone that Astrid, for a moment, got a glimpse of the man who was beneath that larger-than-life chief who had run the village all her life. Her tired head next wondered whether she was possibly looking at a future version of Hiccup, before stepping back and removing a good amount of weight, some shoulder width and -

She wondered if he had an arse anywhere near as firm as Cattongue's. That would be a plus.

It was lucky that Stoick was blinking tiredly at the ceiling and her mother was busy debating with her father, because neither one of them caught her sudden blush on her cheeks - or her truly evil and rebellious eyes sliding to his seat of their own accord. Her mother was bad influence on her; Astrid never thought she'd think that.

Gobber, on the other hand, seemed to have noticed. His eyebrows first shot up, then shot down, and Astrid readied herself for a good

lecture. Until the same bushy eyebrows began wiggling suggestively and his head began nodding towards Cattongue.

Had everyone gone insane?

"You can't make a wager with a man and then not take his prize! It's unethical!" her father was ranting, red in the face. Cattongue was rubbing the back of his neck.

"Sir, I _didn't_ make the wager, and I have little use for silver - I usually sell my trade, and anyone who wants trinkets made in it comes with their own."

"No lovely girl to give it to, yet?" her father asked conspiratorially. "Don't you worry, boy, turn them into a bracelet or two and they'll come running."

"Um, no, Sir." Was it her imagination, or had Cattongue glanced at her? Blast that helmet. And blast her mother's twinkling eyes too! "But, um, what about this?" Another hesitant glance in her direction. "I will take it as payment for repairing Astrid's axe?"

Astrid looked at him sharply, to find everyone in the room looking at her.

"That's Hiccup's axe," she said stoutly, feeling suddenly so awful for saying his name in the same room as Stoick, who grimaced but said nothing. Cattongue simply kept looking at her, and Astrid wanted to slug her mother more than ever. There was no way she liked this idiot.

"I'll say it's a steal," her drunk father said, slapping his knee and standing, much to her mother's scoffing as he stumbled. The two pieces of silver were dropped in front of Cattongue before she left, and Gobber followed, winking at Astrid maddeningly obviously and telling Stoick suggestively that he should totally sleep.

"Well," Cattongue said into the ensuing silence. "I have to say, Hofferson, your father is an interesting man." He could have been smiling, his tone seemed to suggest it, but the helmet refused to give up its secrets, so she simply kept looking at him steadily. His frame slackened slightly and he rolled his shoulders. He picked the silver up and offered it up to her. "You have any way to get this back to your mum? I really wasn't playing for money."

"But my dad gave it, so I don't have the right to take it back. Not part of that household anymore, either." She gave him a tight smile and turned to Stoick. There was an uncomfortable moment, but then Cattongue stood.

"Very well, Hofferson. I'd say I owe you axe repairs. It is \hat{a} € going to have to wait, I'm afraid." He nodded towards his right shoulder, hand in a sling, and it didn't take seeing through metal to know he was scowling at it. "I have to meet all the possible riders tomorrow as well, and see to all the dragons. I really am sorry I can't get to that axe for you right away."

"It really is alright," she replied, smiling in surprise at his vehemence.

"I'm used to living off my trade. I do not like owing people something they have paid for."

"Now you know what all of Berk feels like," she said primely, trying to stare him down. All he did was huff impatiently.

"Berk doesn't owe me anything, Miss Hofferson." Back to the Miss? It only made her more annoyed. "You decided that on your own. But I have to say, I don't mind that much, it gave me the chance to teach you all how great dragons are, really." Toothless cooed his approval at that comment and rubbed his head against the man's thin frame, nearly knocking Cattongue over. Astrid couldn't help a snigger.

"I suppose," she replied, thinking of her nadder, waiting for her at home diligently and obediently.

"Will you be there, tomorrow?" he asked almost hopefully.

"Sorry?"

"For the training; will you be there tomorrow? We lost a whole afternoon because of this." He nodded towards his arm. "I may need a hand with the edgier villagers, and if they see one of their own being comfortable with her dragon, it would be a great help. Fish` being there would be useful, too. Unfortunately, Snotlout already said he's coming."

"Oh, I'll come. If only to see Snotlout trying to 'help'," she replied, earning a snort.

"I think you mean show off."

"Precisely what I said," was her laughing reply. The strange, light feeling returned in her chest as she chortled with him, and she suddenly found herself noticing the line of his shoulders under his shirt, visible now that all his armour had been removed, his well-toned smith arms, the freckles on the back of his hands, and strong but spindly legs, apparently built for speed on the back of a dragon more than for lifting logs and carrying grain sacks for miles on end.

"Will he be strong enough?" he asked cautiously, then. Astrid gave Stoick a worried look, and suddenly felt ice run through her veins as she found his green eyes staring back at her blankly.

Gods, why did she suddenly feel like she had just done something horrible? Why was it feeling like she was being weighed and measured? Was he also seeing what her mother saw - and if he was, what would he do?

Her mother had warned her to be careful precisely for this reason. As much as it pained her to admit it, she belonged to Stoick's clan by right, he'd paid her bride price to her father and received her dowry, which as far as she knew was still lying untouched in the corner of what was once Hiccup's room, and was now her own.

There was a sudden hollow tapping, and Astrid turned with a start towards Goethi, realising with horror that she had also forgotten the _healer _was there, despite the fact that she was in the _healer's

hut_.

Oh Frigga and Freya, she needed protection from this man. Something in the way he fascinated her made him more dangerous to her than any other mace-wielding male or fire breathing dragon she'd ever beheaded in battle.

"Sorry, I really don't understandâ€¦ Er, Hofferson, could you?" Astrid looked blankly at him for a moment before realising he was indicating the Goethi's writings on the floor. With an embarrassed blush - that really had to stop, too - she shook her head.

"Gobber's the only one who can do it, really," she said, feeling uncomfortable admitting the deficiency. The Goethi rubbed her forehead in exasperation, then pointed to Stoick with her staff, pointed towards the door and shook her head once emphatically.

"Ah," Cattongue said. "Darnâ€¦ Sir, it seems Goethi doesn't think you will be able to help for the moment. Is there anything you would like us to do?"

He turned towards Stoick and waited, and Astrid would always remember how earnestly he'd said that. The chief must have had some headache, however, because he gave the younger man a deep scowl.

"If I need, I will tell Astrid," he replied coldly, and the temperature in the room suddenly turned glacial. Feeling that she was at least partially responsible for Stoick's mood for some reason, Astrid shot off the stool, heading towards the door.

"I'll leave him in your hands then, Goethi. Please send word to me if he needs me to do something. I have to make sure that the heirs are well provided for, now that the first snow's upon us."

"It is?" Cattongue said in dismay. "Ah, Loki's balls, I'm totally not stocked up enough on my Island this year," he lamented. Truth was, he'd assumed he would be more than welcome on Freezing, having just made Thuggory such fine axes, and he knew his fellow friend would put in a good word for him. That's what he got, for assuming things. "Going to be lean pickings till the hares break through next spring, bud." Toothless moaned mournfully as they stood to leave, and Cattongue shuddered as Astrid opened the door, letting in the freezing air outside. "Ung, my nose is going to fall off. Frostbite pain! Love it!"

The man and his dragon moved down the tortuous staircase to solid ground, bantering quietly back and forth as Cattongue's off arm was mocked for it stopping them from flying off, as Toothless obviously wanted. Astrid, on the other hand, stood still at the head of the steps, snow accumulating at her feet as she looked down blankly after them, her mind lost in a memory five years old.

Something in her chest shifted as a possibility occurred to her, one that she tried to deflect from the sheer discomfort it caused, but that simply bounced back and attacked again like a harvest fly. In her insistent vigilance over Cattongue, both to find his motivation and to try to gauge his mettle and appease her seemingly illogical fascination with him, she failed to see that perhaps, possibly, just maybe, why she couldn't look away from him was the fact that he reminded her so much of the boy she'd driven off the island with

misplaced, cruel words in some of the things he said and did. He was so different in so many other ways, and yet sometimes, just sometimes, he was just as kind, or just as gentle, or just as awkward. He wasn't the same person, not in the way he spoke or moved, but perhaps he had spent enough time with ... with him to have taken on some of his traits, some of his kindness. Always in a different way, but always just enough to remind her of her Hiccup. She was allowed to call him that, wasn't she? Her Hiccup?

She hoped so.

Astrid hugged herself when the temperature plummeted further as the sun began its early descent towards the horizon. The high post of the Goethi's house gave her a view of all the village, being systematically blanketed in white, and she wondered in sudden alarm where Cattongue would sleep tonight.

"Hofferson?" She blinked down, finding Cattongue looking up at her. He'd obviously climbed up again to see she hadn't fallen or slipped like a silly ninny when he hadn't found her behind him. She knew she should have been furious with him for thinking her any less than a warrior she was, but Hiccup's face jumped to her mind, always kind in these little ways as well, and suddenly her chest filled with the strangest of feelings, as if someone had let loose a pack of frightened terrors in there.

"You're not sleeping in the forest tonight," she said, jutting her chin out defiantly against the weirdness and shouldering her way through her thoughts.

"Er, I rather figured. I'd be fine really, once I got there, but the track there with my armour at Gobber's may do me in. He's offered a blanket at the smithy, though, and I think I'll take it. Save time getting here tomorrow too, since I can't fly yet, the Goethi says."

"Good." She walked around him, descending the stairs in front of him, and pointedly made herself ignore his footsteps behind her. And if she listened to them carefully anyway, it was only to make sure he didn't tumble into her and take her with him if he slipped.

=0=

Hiccup huffed at himself in annoyance as he trudged back up the winding stairs, wind cutting through his clothing. He'd really been looking forward to some quiet time with Toothless and Gobber in the forge, but nooo, he had to go and forget his shoulder pad in the Goethi's hut. He needed that repaired as soon as possible, because injured arm or not, he wasn't to know when he'd need it next, and he'd learned the hard way to focus and plan ahead; when the alternative was starving, letting go of distractions became second nature. Pity there wasn't a distraction like Astrid anywhere on his island that could have trained him against her lovely eyes and self in general.

So here he was, sprinting through the sparse light up to the healer's hut again, praying to get back to the forge before the dusk faded completely.

His knock wasn't answered, and instead of knocking again and risking a disturbance of his dad's sleep, he let himself in as quietly as he could. The Goethi wasn't there, although where she could have gone with the snow still fresh on the ground and night fast approaching he didn't know. His father was a large bundle on the largest wooden bunk. The sight of Stoick's head, bundled up with its huge bandage made his stomach sink into his feet.

When Stoick'd been hit, during the heat of battle, it had fired up his blood like nothing else would - well, perhaps her being in danger. And after, when he'd started blindly calling him by name in his delirium as they bodily dragged him to the healer's hut â€| it had hammered the last nail in the coffin of his denial.

He'd missed his dad. He still loved him with all his heart. And a very large part of him still wished to live up to Stoick's expectations.

Hiccup tiptoed into the room, closing the door behind him carefully, and then looking around to try to find his missing armour. He also carefully deposited the chainmail he'd done for his dad as quietly as he could on the table. His head had been a litany of 'if only's and 'why didn't he's since Stoick had been injured, as the mail had a hood, and if only he'd just worn it â€|

He grabbed the shoulder pad, fingering the hole in it with a discontented frown, and turned towards the door when a grunt from the bed made him pause. Stoick was obviously in some discomfort, as he was sleeping uneasily, and Hiccup stepped up to his bed before he could stop himself. Lifting the blanket carefully, he raised it up the large man's chest, stepping back when his dad came awake with a grunt.

"What do you want?" Stoick asked, his voice rough from sleep and eyes shining with fatigue. Hiccup bit his lip and felt terrible for waking him.

"Nothing, nothing," he said quickly. "I was just â€|" It felt odd to admit that he was covering his dad - it felt too personal, something only family was allowed to do, somehow. The fact that he wasn't allowed anymore was more of a pang than he cared to admit. "I was just retrieving this, and I was leaving."

Stoick gave another grunt, eyeballing him carefully. Hiccup felt five years old again, somehow in trouble for having tried to help and gotten it wrong again.

"Is there anything you need?" he whispered despite himself. The echo of his dad's uncomfortable groan haunted him, and he reached into the pot for a ladle-full of willow bark brew. "Maybe some willowbark, Sir. That wound mustn't be comfortable."

"Don't mock me, boy," his dad hissed, and Hiccup was five years old again, trying so hard and never quite measuring up. With a sigh, he gave up; it was no use, and he was truly stupid for not having given up on this yet. Yes, his dad didn't know who he was right now, but Hiccup had never seen Stoick treat anyone the way he was treating 'Cattongue'. Stoick had hated Hotshot, but he'd always treated him cordially when he sailed in. He really didn't like Osvald's son Dagur, but he'd never let it on. Hiccup? He'd made sure Hiccup always

knew how disappointed he was in him. And now somehow, even in disguise, he managed to garner his dad's disdain. It really was dishearteningâ€¦ but also frustrating.

"Sir," he finally said, letting out a disgruntled sigh. "I don't know what your problem with me is, Sir. I've never done anything to harm your tribe, nor will I ever." That wasn't even a lie, either; even if Berk actually ran him out with spears this time, he still somehow wouldn't be able to bring himself to hate it. "But you seem to dislike me on principle." He swallowed. That was harder to admit than he thought, and his voice had almost cracked.

His chest swelled up, but he stamped it down regardless, letting anger fill him instead; disappointment and years of loneliness used as fuel for silly righteous anger that was pointless in the long run, but needed at the moment, and went on. "I only wish to help, and I will help, in spite of you or with your approval. Good night." He turned to leave and was with his hand on the door.

"You think you're so smart," Stoick answered from the back, rising to a sitting position laboriously. Hiccup had to resist the urge to rush to help him. "You think you have more to offer this village than any of us here? That you know more on Berk and of Berk to see what is right by us better than those who lived here before you were even born?"

Stoick snarled at him. Hiccup resisted the urge to take a step back. He'd never seen his father like this; he'd been angry often, disappointed often, and so very cold sometimes. But he'd been wrong before; Hiccup had never been on the receiving end of something like this treatment 'Cattongue' was being dished. Hiccup felt the chilling certainty running up his spine that had Stoick not been addled by his head injury, he would have reached out and wrung his neck in a moment with no remorse.

"Let me tell you something. Every man, woman and child of this village is worth a hundred of you. And even if we are in your debt, do not think for a single moment that we'll let you walk all over us."

"What? Sir, Iâ€¦"

"And let me tell you something else. My son is a thousand times the man you are, so let me make myself clear; don't make yourself comfortable here. You, your attitude and your strange ideas are not welcome, nor will you ever be."

Hiccup stepped back, trying to resist the urge to shudder and only succeeding partially. With a clumsy nod, he ducked out the door, his chest roiling and threatening to collapse in on itself between confused hurt and honest to Asgard fright. His father had looked deadly, like Hiccup had never seen him look in his direction, and it was terrifying to be on the receiving end of that stare.

And it was so, so confusing. What had Stoick meant? Why had he spoken of Hiccup like that - why had he brought his name up at all, out of nowhere? Hiccup couldn't understand, try as he might as he ran through the village towards the forge. Somehow, it felt like the ultimate paradox, a secret box the likes he'd seen only once, and managed to solve only after countless hours of delicate teasing and

finangeling. Stoick spoke of him as if he was someone he was proud of, and yet Hiccup's mere presence had made him so irrationally angry that he'd been snarling like an angry nightmare. He couldn't decide whether or not to be happy that his father seemed to think well of him, when him being there and just being himself seemed to be enough to make his dad hate him at the same time.

Stoick was possibly only speaking through nostalgia, through guilt, perhaps. If Hiccup were to take off the helmet and say the truth, would Stoick's furious, snarling face become something he consciously directed towards the son he thought he was proud of? Did that mean that Stoick was proud of the boy he had been five years ago, but could never be proud of what Hiccup had become? Because 'Cattongue' _was_ what Hiccup had become. If he elicited this reaction from his dad simply by being on Berk, it meant that nothing he'd done had any worth in the chief's eyes.

He really was five years old again, trying so badly to help out, and being scolded into the corner for making a mess of it all instead.

By the time he'd reached the forge, Hiccup was freezing, and no less confused. Gobber had left a hot bowl of soup by the smouldering embers, and he sat down to it, his hopes of discussing things with the blacksmith dashed. Toothless curled up around him, always sensitive to his moods. Lying back against his best friend and constant companion, Hiccup found consolations in the fact that at least, Berk would know how awesome dragons were, approval or no approval.

And another thing bloomed in his chest through the confusion. At least, somehow, his dad really did miss him. Perhaps Astrid had been saying the truth, because the tone of pride as he spoke about '_his son_' had been unmistakable. Even if he left Berk, and never came back after this business was through, that was one thing he could carry with him.

His dad had spoken of him with pride to a perceived stranger, almost boasting in his tone. It didn't matter what he'd been thinking or whether he was sincere; it didn't matter if Hiccup's current self and life was something his dad hated; Stoick the Vast had spoken of Hiccup the Useless with _pride_.

Somehow, it made everything a little bit better.

=0=

"So Stoick, you sure you're up for this?" Gobber asked as they gathered around the chief's bed in the healer's hut. The poor Goethi had been sent to spend the night at the Jorgensen's hall so that the men of the council could discuss things quietly.

"I'm not out on the count yet," he growled, feeling more than a little offended at his best friend's doubt. "We have to step things up. We don't have time for a small wound to get in the way."

"Eh, same thing Cattongue said," Gobber replied with a nonchalant shrug that made Stoick's temper rise another notch.

"So why do you say we have to get things going?" Ingerman asked in

his quiet yet authoritative way.

"That boy," Stock spat with proud disdain, "was in here when I wrote up, after everyone had left, and then tried to feed me willow bark tea."

"Maybe because you were in pain, and you're cranky when you are?" Gobber interjected helpfully. Stoick couldn't stop the furious glare this time. Whose side was Gobber on?

"After he was gone already? Conveniently, he waited for the Goethi to leave as well before he came up with his bogus excuse to come back. I'll have the Goethi throw that tea out tomorrow. I'll warrant there's something in there that shouldn't."

"Oy, now 'ang on..."

"So you think he's about to make another move, Stoick?" Spitelout asked in a growl.

"That's more than certain. And we'll be ready for him. We're not as stupid as he thinks we are; he's trying to get his hand on Berk, through wits if not through blood. Make us trust him, make us think he's a decent sort, teach us a few cheap tricks. He's already gotten under the skin of all the rest of the tribes, so he has plenty of support there. If push comes to shove, we're in this on our own. But we don't need them; I want at least one of you with him at all times. With all the dragons he captured, there will be little we can do if he actually pits them against us. But if you see any suspicious behavior, any at all, wring his neck."

A chorus of 'Aye's, and one sigh.

"I think you're looking at this all wrong," Gobber said. Stoick's temper gave another jolt. "He's honestly trying to help, Stoick. Been talking to him in the smithy, I have, and he hasn't once said anything untowards. I'd swear on it."

"Oh, he hasn't, has he? Of course he wouldn't! Can't you see! He's trying to win us over, get into our good books. Do us favours for free then sick us with the steep bill at the end of it. I won't have that, Gobber. I won't let him take my Hiccup's place with his underhanded ways!"

Gobber seemed to bristle at this. "He doesn't want your Hiccup's place, don't you see it! Don't you see it at all? He won't stay past this business, Stoick. Not fer want of trying on mah part, neither."

Betrayal rose in Stoick's chest like another wound. "What do you mean by that?" he growled. Gobber looked away.

"Only that he's a good smith, Stoick. Would be nice to know who the smithy's going to after I'm gone. Odin knows I don't have the patience to take on another bairn."

"You don't need to. Hiccup will take over when he's back," Stoick answered stubbornly. This seemed to ignite Gobber's own ire.

"Damn you Stoick. Didn't I just say? He's not... He not coming back,

Stoick. He would have if he wanted to."

"And who told you this?" Stoick growled, suddenly very aware of the top fighters in his village listening in to this conversation. They couldn't know, couldn't suspect that his only boy wasn't coming back. They would only insist on wanting another heir. They would insist on writing his Hiccup's name out, even if now Stoick knew with crushing certainty that his boy was alive and well and out there.

He had started to resign himself to leaving it all to Astrid before. The girl was steady, good, strong, and had seemed to have a place for his Hiccup in her heart as well, if only to remember a comrade.

Now he wasn't so sure. He has seen the way she looked at that slithering snake of a man. He had managed to hoodwink her, reel her into his little honey trap. She was too young, too naive, and she was not worthy to take his smart Hiccup's place.

No one was.

"Is this what your loyalty amounts to?" He snarled at the blacksmith who had been his best friend for years. Stoick felt trapped, like a noose had suddenly surrounded his neck while he was unawares. While he wasn't looking that slimy eel of a boy had taken from him both the girl he'd lived with and trusted since Hiccup was gone, and the best friend he'd known and trusted all his life. If even Gobber and Astrid were doubting him, if even Gobber was gainsaying his words in front of everyone, there was very little left he could do. Already, the number of people who had answered his summons had decreased. Hoark was missing. The Thorstons too. Ingerman was here, he was sure, because the large man was peaceful, and always liked to know all the sides of things before making a decision. Very few were left who truly believed his word; and that meant that very few were left who believed in him as a chief. Which meant that what he most feared was happening, regardless of how hard he fought to keep Hiccup's birthright away from this sleazy boy's hands.

Stoick felt trapped. Cornered. And like any cornered animal, he knew he was at his most dangerous.

"Who told you that, aye? _Cattongue_ did, of course, didn't he?" Stoick rose laboriously, shrugging off any hand that tried to help him steady himself. There wasn't a finish line set up for him - not yet. He was Stoick the Vast, Haddock, chief of Berk. There would be another Haddock at the helm of Berk after him; he would not be the last one. "That's how much your loyalty's worth, Gobber? Hoodwinked by a mere boy. I thought you of all people would have Hiccup's interest at heart. Evidently all your talk about 'making it up to him' was only that. Talk."

Gobber stood up, crimson below his flaxen beard. He rolled his massive shoulders, opening his mouth several times before he managed to say anything. With a pointed, cocked finger, he levelled Stoick with his worse glare, one Stoick hadn't seen since they'd come to blows over Hiccup leaving, and since they had been stuck on a mountain, huddling to avoid freezing to death on the path of his grandfather Hamish's treasure. He seemed on the point of exploding into a tirade of words that would not be easy to take back.

Until he didn't. Gobber rolled his shoulders, swallowed three times,

as if trying to keep the words in his belly, and ran a meaty hand down his crimson face.

"We will talk about this later, Stoick, over a tankard of good ale, someday. And I won't accept your apology, because I know you don't mean any of that, even though right now you do." Stoick opened his mouth, fury rising with bile to choke him up, but Gobber cut him off again. "I just have one more thing to say to you, Stoick. If you want to see your son again, don't harm Cattongue."

"What?" Stoick asked, voice dangerously low. Was that â€| was that a threat?

"He knows where he is, Stoick. He knows where he is, and I've been prying it from him a little at a time. Astrid too. Hiccup â€| doesn't seem to think he's ready to come back yet, seems to think he's not good enough for Berk; but he is, and we need him. He's asked those who are in the know to keep it quiet, and they are. So I've been working on it." He slapped the back of his neck, looking steadily at Stoick in a way that began to calm some of the ire burning in his belly. Gobber was on his side; Gobber had always been on his side. He should feel shame for the way he was treating those who were friends and family.

But he didn't have time for shame. Not when he had a village to run, a birthright to protect and a son to recover.

"You'll do that, then?" Stoick asked.

"Yeah, but only if you don't do something stupid to Cattongue before it all calms down," Gobber replied, folding his arms. "You really have to stop being so paranoid, Stoick. That boy wants nothing from Berk except what he says."

That much he didn't believe. But as long as Gobber kept doing what he saidâ€| and if it turned out Cattongue was lying on that too, there would just be more hours added to his slow, agonising death.

"Right, then." He turned to the other men. "Are we all in agreement on this? We wait for Gobber to bring us news?" The men nodded. Stoick turned a narrow eyed look on the blacksmith again. "And we don't harm him. For now. Unless it looks like he's trying something stupid. So we still _keep an eye on him_."

Gobber narrowed his eyes right back and huffed, leaving the hut without an 'aye'. All the others shifted at the tension, but gave an 'aye' and were on their way. Spitelout went last, giving him a nod and closing the door behind him.

Stoick was left looking at the ceiling in tired confusion. His addled, injured mind was presenting him with two worlds, two possibilities that seemed to be mutually exclusive. One was a world where Gobber was right; where the acts of kindness and respect that boy was perpetuating were genuine, and they were going to be rid of him the moment this problem was solved. Then there was the world which was much more likely, the one where there was something else in that willow tea, something else behind every kind gesture, and they would never, ever be rid of him.

Stoick couldn't decide which world was worse. There was simply too

much to lose, too much at stake in both. The boy had fought back-to-back with him, covered him and put himself in harm's way. A warrior did not forget another's courage. But Stoick also knew that that display was one way like another to showcase his strength and his ability to the village in order to promote himself and his own agenda. And for a moment, during the battle and after, he had been so sure, so certain he had heard Hiccupâ€¦

Stoick fell asleep with his son's voice in his ears, and fell into dreams where he stabbed a spear into all his enemies' hearts, and the dreams stabbed his heart right back.

=0=

An honest thank-you to all my sweet reviewers, who take their time to leave notes and reviews to me about their likes AND dislikes in this narrative. In case you missed the memo last chapter, I will no longer be able to answer individual reviews/PMS as my professional requirements have just doubled on the Real Life front. Please forgive me, and I will try as much as I can! And a great big Thank You to Foxy, who's been helping me out with hammering a (possibly, not sure it's happening yet) sequel idea. Go support her on BRACED when it starts coming out, please! Foxy-girl is only becoming a better writer with time.

=0=

****Before the baying for blood starts â€¦ I want you all to remember that Stoick does NOT know it is Hiccup â€" he is, in fact,
*_**protecting *_**his son's interests. The Viking way. I am so cruel to him. I almost wish you all didn't know who Cattongue was; it would be easier for your all to appreciate what Stoick is going through.
>**

****And Astrid circles closerâ€¦****

15. Day 5

****Tralala. Hi! This is the chapter that will make your chest explode. Please enjoy.
>**

*** * ***

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1_

Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir****

*** * ***

><p>Day 5

"Fireworm!"

Astrid had never heard Cattongue yell so angrily. It almost made her feel guilty that she was so gleeful about it, but he deserved it, _so badly_.

The monstrous nightmare he'd called sat up very straight, looking at him eagerly and expectantly. Astrid got a shiver running up her spine at how well he could do that. All the dragons, even newly tamed ones, simply fell over themselves to try to make him happy. And he was so rarely angry with them, just like the children - he knew just the right amount of pressure to put.

This one, though; this one had been getting on everyone's nerves all morning.

"Fireworm, be a dear and sit on him."

The nightmare promptly obeyed, sitting on her rider and causing Snotlout to wail and flail uselessly against her belly. She nuzzled him fondly, but stayed where she was, as if she was caring for a rather daft hatchling. Or so Astrid felt sometimes.

"Sorry about that, everyone. Now, let us continue. The first wave, please. We're fighting other dragons, so we can't go up against them with the wooden defenses. Troll Peak has been equipped with more of the bells and nets, but I will need you all to be familiar with your mounts and able to fly properly as quickly as possible. I can't have anyone falling off into the beach. You wouldn't come out alive and I want as few people to get hurt here as possible. So, all those with gronkles, please follow Treeshade, from the Meathead clan. She and her gronkle have been flying together for two years now, and she'll be able to tell you all the best tricks to handle your dragons. Fishlegs!" The smile in his voice was obvious, and as the larger boy lumbered forward Cattongue walked to greet them, rubbing his hand on Meatlug's snout. "How's it been going?"

"Better now that we have our saddle, isn't it my armoured little Meatlug?" Fishlegs replied. Astrid couldn't help walking up as she heard Cattongue laugh, something tingling at the back of her mind as he did, every time.

"And how have you been liking your new home, eh Meatlug? Been treating little Woodnut right?"

Astrid almost snorted. Gods, if even the outsider knew the little tot's name before Ruffnut and before Fishlegs presented her in the hall, Ruff was going to kill him for sure. Meatlug only dilated her pupils and lolled her tongue, butting her large snout against the slimmer male. Toothless, always attentive to his rider, kept Cattongue from clapping on his back by catching him against his scaly chest.

"Good then. Do you mind going with the lot, Fishlegs? You've learned more about Gronkles in these two days than some of us have in years." Fishlegs flushed but puffed his chest out, slapping Cattongue on the shoulder. "Would you give them a hand and go with Treeshade?"

"With pleasure. Come on darling, you and daddy must help all the other new riders today."

"Like a fish to water," Cattongue murmured to her as he watched them go. When he turned to her, she could clearly see his eyes through the helmet, and they were twinkling with a smile.

And green. She'd never remembered that they were green before. A

very pretty shade of green. Just like Hiccup's when he was about to do something mad that got him into trouble again. She'd always thought his eyes were his best feature.

What on _Midgard _was she thinking?

Cattongue seemed to realise that he was talking with her in a rather conspiratorial and familiar manner, as he lurched back as if she'd punched him, looking away quickly and briskly walking toward the rest.

"Ok, Cami! I want you to take all the folk with changewings and zipplebacks on the beach, and I want at least one changewing for every zippleback team. We are going to need to pair you all up; these dragons are a destructive match made in Asgard. Off you go! Phlegma - do me a favour and keep an eye on all of them, if you please?"

The tough woman gave a nod, looking at Tuffnut specifically as she led her own zippleback towards the beach. Tuffnut seemed none too pleased that he'd been saddled with one of his younger sisters to share his dragon; Astrid would have been so much more comfortable if Ruffnut could have joined him. With all their horrid perchance to punch each other in the face, the twins had the odd habit of balancing each other's madness out. Fernnut seemed about as comfortable on a dragon as a mouse on a moustrap. Her poor zippleback head was trying to nuzzle her, and only succeeding in making her squeak.

"Heather!" The Meathead heir's bride looked up and nodded without another word, beginning to round up all the riders who had been paired with a nadder and leading them towards a clearing at the foot of the mountains they'd already agreed upon, where the nadders and riders would have plenty of time for bonding and target practice.

"Well then," Astrid said, uncomfortable with the fact that she was more than a little reluctant to leave.

"Hofferson. Er æ|" he turned to look at her again, and for the second time that morning, she had a clear view of his eyes through his mask as he looked directly at her. Directly, and rather beseechingly.

"Not a chance; I'm staying right here," she said, and was utterly gratified to see the relief and gratitude come over his eyes as he turned to look at the remaining dragons and riders before turning to her again.

She could read him through the mask, now? It should have been cause for celebration that she was cracking him - and that he was turning to her for _help_ - but it was equally alarming that she was feeling so gleeful and satisfied in the rather æ| deep connection that was taking root in their everyday interactions.

She'd known him for a few days. But somehow that is not what it felt like.

She shook it off as she turned to look at the others.

"The second wave," he said quietly, squaring his shoulders and

folding his arms, more than a little nervous judging by the trepidation in his voice. Hoark was there, and Thuggory, but so were all the other nightmare riders, close and â€| less close with their mount.

Snotlout had still not managed to get out from Fireworm's warm belly-trap.

"Let's begin," he said, stepping forward.

Later - much, much later - Astrid slumped against a wall, tired beyond belief as she watched the last few dragon riders exit the arena - or what was left of it - hopefully ready to face more difficult training tomorrow. It had been a productive day, bar a few close calls and a few hard heads on both sides, and she was at least confident that the dragon-viking pairs they had created today, between nightmares and some of the other more powerful species, wouldn't kill each other in their sleep.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Cattongue slump on a rock just outside on the ledge facing into the arena, Tootless lying belly up beside him as his rider idly dragged a stick in the dirt in front of him. With a smile and a huff, she pushed off the wall and approached him quietly, realising belatedly that he was murmuring to his dragon, and drawing into the clay dirt. Before she could take a curious peek at what he was drawing, Toothless swiped a wing across it.

"Hey! Don't do that to my drawings of the most beautiful woman in Midgard!"

Astrid felt herself stiffen as the dragon rolled onto its back again and cuffed Cattongue with its tail, nodding its head back towards her. Cattongue looked back and tensed considerably, rubbing the back of his neck and looking away too quickly to be casual.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt your quiet time," she said, feeling suddenly awful for intruding on what was obviously a moment of memory for him. Something rolled uncomfortably in her chest as she remembered Ruffnut telling her what she'd heard from the Bog heir, and how loyal he still was towards the woman he had attached himself to. It was such an uncomfortable lurch, one that made her insides feel ill and out of place. And that he called this girl the most beautiful woman in Midgardâ€|

"No no, no; it's fine, I was just fooling around with a stick," he said apologetically. "Some day, huh. I'm about ready to hit the hay at Gobber's. It looks like it will snow again tonight."

"It will," she said, looking up at the sky. "But you need to eat before you rest. Why don't you come to the mead hall and have something before you rest a while?"

"I'll fall asleep on one of the benches," he joked, stick moving in the clay again seemingly of its own accord, and an axe and an armoured skirt taking shape before her eyes. Trepidation suddenly rose to her throat as the flashing thought of how she measured up against the 'most beautiful woman in midgard' in an axe fight clogged her breathing with confusion.

"So where did you meet her?" she asked with forced casualness,

nodding her chin towards the two legs that had begun to take shape under the skirt. Cattongue started and seemed to realised what his hand was doing for the first time, throwing the stick away as if it burned him.

"Nowhere, I -er- wasn't drawing anyone in particular. Just a, just a shieldmaiden I once knew."

"It's ok," Astrid replied, smiling tiredly. "No need for that. Cami's spilled the beans, about this girl you're mad about. Told Ruff all sorts of things about the Bog women who tried to land you. It was quite entertaining."

"She did, huh?" What was also entertaining was watching the blush rise up his neck. However, two other warring emotions also rose with it - her wish to see it climb up his face, and her curiosity about this woman of his.

"Yup. So tell me about her." He looked at her incredulously. "Oh go on. I'm not about to go spread it to the winds like Ruff. And she's probably out there, waiting for you. So you'd better remember her."

Same way Hiccup had better remember her; even if they weren't friends anymore before he left; even if he'd never mentioned her to any of his new friends.

The ill feeling returned. Ah; it was envy. Not an emotion she'd own up to any time soon.

"She was â€| someone I knew. Incredible with an axe â€| incredible temper, too. You wouldn't want to get on her bad side. I seemed kind of unable to get out of it."

"Ah. She wasn't yours, then?" she asked gently, wondering why the knot in her chest loosened. It didn't make any difference to her. Her Hiccup didn't remember _her_ in this way. The knot came back.

"Noâ€|" he replied, voice tight and sad. Astrid felt awful for bringing it up, but it seemed he wasn't done. "But you know, I don't mind. She's strong, stronger than anyone I know. And as long as she's happyâ€|" He turned to look at her, and the steely sunlight reflected onto his eyes, turning them into a green lighter than the clearest stream water, only a shade more coloured than the whites of his eyes beyond the darker outer rim. "Are you happy?"

The question hit her like a ton of bricks, and the place in her belly that had been burning hotter and hotter as he spoke turned under her diaphragm, cutting off her breathing so that her next question came out strangled.

"What?"

"I mean," he went on quickly, looking away abruptly as another blush climbed his neck. "You remind me of her, a great deal. And if you're happy, I can hope that she is too. So â€| are you happy?"

Astrid had to swallow twice to bring spit to her mouth. With her heart beating more loudly than she cared to take notice, she looked

down at the half-smudged, half finished lines in the clay dirt.

"Well, I'm not badly off," she started, trying to organise her thoughts into something that resembled some sort of coherency. There was just too much going on inside her, jumbled into one, but she wrung it back into some sort of ordered thought. "I mean, I could be happier. If everything goes well with â€|" she gestured towards the sea, her voice going low as if she were afraid to summon it. "And if â€| if Hiccup came home, I'd definitely be happier. But I'm not badly off, all told."

Cattongue looked at her, eyes unblinking for a few moments. It looked like he planned on sitting there all night. Astrid had begun to feel that she wouldn't mind too much.

Toothless seemed to be impatient, on the other hand, as he swiped a tail across the clay lines again and slapped Cattongue in the face - or where his face was under the helmet, anyway. The ringing sound the metal tail rig made wasn't pleasant on the outside of that helmet, and she was sure it was worse on the inside.

"OW! Why you, stupid reptile! Would you stop that!" He got up and chased Toothless around the rock, finally jumping up and launching himself on the night fury's back - who promptly rolled over onto him and made him groan and flail. Astrid had to contain a laugh as Cattongue began to vocally and dramatically proclaim an open war with the dragons, as a result of his untimely demise, all because Toothless couldn't wait a few minutes for his fish.

"Gah, alright, alright; get off, and don't you dare drool all over me. I have too much to do for a proper bath and that doesn't wash out anyway," he complained, pushing the reptile off and scrabbling against his scales to get up. Toothless obliged with a laugh of his own kind, rolling back onto his paws with Cattongue conveniently clinging to his back.

"So, to the Hall for a hot meal?" Astrid said, standing up. Toothless gave a shake and gruff grumble. Cattongue looked back at her with a shrug.

"Mr. Bossy vetoed that. Sorry, A- Hofferson. I'd say, maybe, next time?"

Astrid shrugged, her heart giving another skip as he almost called her by name. "Hall's open every day," she replied, and waved as he took off, sitting back down on the boulder in disappointment. She looked back towards the sketch he was tracing in the clay, now nothing but a smudged mess of tossed clay dust, the ground tussled and turned from Toothless' and Cattongue's gyrationsâ€|

Astrid blinked, steely light beginning to turn reddish and glinting off black stone-like things their tussling had obviously uncovered. Reaching down, she picked up two of them, and froze the moment they were in her hand.

They were round and flat, tapered off on one side. They were dark, almost black. With midnight blue, lovely veins lining them, like pipe smoke at midnight.

Her hands began to tremble as she looked at them, holding them up against the light to see their colours and patterns better. The .. pattern was ... the size also slightly smaller, but ... there was no mistaking it.

She scrambled for her pendent, pulling it off almost too roughly, and with shaky fingers undid the clasp that kept the jewel inside the silver casing she'd worn for five years.

Hands trembling almost violently, she held it up to the light. The size was different, the patterns unique to each one. But there was no mistaking that they were identical.

Many, tiny, seemingly insignificant things began to fall into place. Why his laugh was so familiar; why she enjoyed his company and felt she'd known him for so long; how he knew where everything was on Berk and why she remembered parchment and ink and sea-salt when they talked.

Gobber, whistling again. Thuggory and Heather's wedding axes. How he had gotten off the island so quickly and quietly. His lovely green eyes.

Why he reminded her so much of Hiccup.

He was Hiccup.

"So you finally noticed?"

Astrid turned around, hands still outstretched in front of her face as she held out all the jewels - which were night fury scales - to find Fishlegs looking at her understandingly. How long had she been there? How long had he been gone? Where was he?

"Oh gods," she gasped, dropping the scales she'd picked up and fumbling with her own so badly Fishlegs had to take it from her to put it in her pendent and clasp it to her neck. She looked up at him, a burning feeling in her belly making her breath short. "Oh gods, Fishlegs, I - He -"

"I don't think he's ready for us to know yet," came Fishlegs' calm response, although he too was biting his lip. Astrid, however, couldn't hear it; she couldn't hear anything right now above her own breathing and heartbeat.

"Fishlegs, I can't, I just-"

"Astrid-"

"Please, tell them I'm training," she begged, backing off towards the woods. "Tell them I'm training, please, have Ruff spread the rushes and take them to the hall, and, please, tell them I'm training!"

With one last desperate plea, she launched herself into the treeline, running blindly until she missed a root completely and fell face-first into the underbrush. Spitting out a mouthful of leaves, Astrid stood back up, grabbing her dagger and began launching herself at whatever came into her eyesight, rolling and tumbling, screaming and yelling and kicking and slashing.

When the light disappeared, she took several gulps of air as she collapsed. She was trembling all over, exhausted, dirty. But her belly hadn't stopped burning, and Astrid finally realised that it was a mixture of anxiety, and happiness.

Hiccup was safe. He was back, he was on Berk, and she had actually apologised to him. She'd told him that she wished he were back. That him coming back would make her happy, that she was engaged to him. All the things she had been dreading to say, she'd said them already.

But he'd never told them who he was either; never responded to her in any way where she couldn't see had another, neutral meaning to whatever alternate, more heartfelt emotion she wanted to attach to his tone and response - and why had he never taken off that damned helm-

Obviously because he didn't want them to recognise him.

She began to remember other things. What Thuggory said, what he had said about him being unneeded in his clan on their first meeting. How he was working so tirelessly for all of them, even if he still thought they didn't really want him.

Or maybe now he really didn't want them. He didn't want to be stuck here when he could travel and visit all the tribes and all the world from his dragon's back.

And then there was her; the woman he'd fallen for, this 'most beautiful in midgard' girl who he apparently couldn't get over. He wouldn't want to be engaged to Astrid, no matter how similar they were, if he was in love with someone else and perhaps had a chance with her.

It began to rain, quietly at first as the trees took the worst of it, then loudly as accumulated moisture dripped off the pine cones and fir needles into the ground and her. She rose and walked towards the village, but didn't head towards Stoick's hall. As soon as she was in sight of the village, she sat down and looked up at the moon's hazy light through the clouds.

She needed to think.

=0=

Hiccup, at three years, was tall for his age, but had still retained the baby chub that made him a darling to look at. And he used his large, round green eyes on no one better than his parents.

"Dada?"

Like now. Holding the wooden duck toy he towed by its string, he was looking up at his father beseechingly, fiddling with the string and rolling the wooden egg that spun as he pulled it. Ah - so it had come apart again. Gobber had given the child the toy and he'd instantly adored it, as opposed to the toy mace Stoick himself had given him. But it kept falling apart (woodwork wasn't the smith's best talent, it would seem. He'd best stick to metal) and causing his little man

grief. He'd have to have a word with Gobber. And possibly start up woodwork himself.

"What is it, lad?" he asked anyway. Hiccup gave him a toothy smile, a look of pure adoration on his face that filled his chest with pride. Stoick had never known a feeling like this; when his son looked up at him, his eyes full of wonder and admiration, there was nothing in the world like it.

"Dada fix it?" he asked, holding out the wooden toy duck as far as his little arms could stretch. It still wasn't far at all, and Stoick had to stoop down and squat to take the tiny thing.

"Stoick!"

Turning around, he found the men waiting at the door of the hall, looking expectant. His boy had caught him right as he was about to leave with his council to inaugurate one of the new fishing boats they had just finished building for the season, and start the blessing ceremony so the Goethi could send them off to a hopefully abundant catch.

Hiccup, at three, was already a little man, and Stoick was even prouder of him than any dad had the right to be, because he was smart as a shining piece of silver, and immediately realised what was going on.

"Dada busy?" he asked, taking his toy back without further question or complaint. Stoick rubbed his head fondly, half the boy disappearing under his meaty hand and making his son giggle. Val walked up, arms folded and half a smile on her face, a smart comment about to leave her lovely mouth, no doubt. Hiccup scuttled off to hug his mother's knees, which he could at least get his arms around partially. He turned to give Stoick one last, toothy smile.

"Later, Dada?"

"Count on it, son!"

Stoick blinked as he walked out of the Great Hall, suddenly unable to remember why he had left it in the first place as the door bounced shut behind him. A rare full day of sunlight was shining outside, and his bear cloak suddenly felt hot against his back.

"Hoy Stoick, ready for the forest patrol?" Hoark asked him, going over a list written on parchment with attention. Judging by the paper's edges, it was forest fire season. Ah.

"Right away. Do we have the water cistern with us?" he asked, falling into the familiar routine of every year. It was always one thing after the other with the village, always one thing closing and a thousand things still to be done, year after year.

Suddenly, among legs and feet at the top of the large Hall staircase, a tiny russet head appeared, and soon after a pair of shining green eyes were looking up at him again. Stoick blinked, somehow able to feel that this made no sense, but not really knowing why. Hiccup was about seven, at least hip-high now, where all the other boys his age had reached their father's waist. But he still stood head and

shoulders above all the others for smarts. In fact, he was carrying a paper in his hand that looked very much like one of those hare-brained ideas that Gobber seemed to encourage, of all things.

"Daddy, I have an idea that might help!" he said excitedly, running up and getting underfoot, causing a number of people to totter on one foot lest they step on him. He felt like chuckling, but the look on some of their faces stopped him. Since his mother had gone, Hiccup had been out of the house more often, simply due to the fact that there was nothing and no one to keep him in it anymore. But it had been two years now, and he should have grown out of this bad habit when scolded.

"Hiccup, I told you to stay inside, today," he told him sternly. The shine in his son's eyes instantly dampened, but he bit his lip and held the paper up anyway.

"I had to go to the forge today, remember? You said Gobber wanted me there." There was a happy smile again on his face, and Stoick was glad his son was content to work in the forge with his friend. They seemed to get along well enough, and for a moment Stoick wondered whether he was destined to be surrounded by smart but half-mad people. He missed Val more than anything, even though she sometimes made things worse by adding her brand of humour to everything. "And Gobber said you would want to see this." His small smile, mismatched teeth too big for his face, faltered. "Sorry. Was he wrong, daddy?"

"No, son. Give it here." He took the paper, trying to pretend interest as he deciphered the childish scrawl. It didn't take him much to realise that the uneven handwriting betrayed the brilliance of the idea, where barrels full of water were launched into the raging forest from their war machines wheeled to the tree edges. It would have some logistical problems, but â€¦

"What is this at the bottom, son?" he asked, the back of his brain already working out the implications and implementations of his son's idea.

"That's a fire brigade!" Hiccup said enthusiastically, green eyes shining brilliantly again. Stoick had to stop himself from ruffling his hair - his boy was growing now, it did not do to show too much affection in public. And it was bloody awkward anyway. "I thought the others and Fishlegs and I could carry a barrel around each one of us, and when there's a fire because of the dragons we throw water at it!"

"Aye?" he said, trying to make out the excited drawing of people with their names underneath. Not a bad idea, that, although if they hauled a full sized barrel around on a cart, they wouldâ€¦ speaking of hauling. "You sure you can carry a small barrel full of water, son?"

Somehow, he'd said the wrong thing, as the shine in his son's eyes disappeared, and a blush rushed up his face.

"That's what Gobber said," he grumbled. Stoick resisted the urge to chuckle, but pat his son on the back. The shine of happiness and admiration returned and Stoick couldn't help smiling back.

"I think we could work with these. Now, off you go back to the forge with ye, son!"

"But-?"

"Stoick! All ready to go on patrol!"

He turned to his son after signaling to Spitelout, and his boy already had understanding in his eyes.

"Ok, daddy. Later?"

"Of course, son!"

By the time he reached the bottom of the long staircase it was night somehow. Stoick blinked, rubbing his eyes and feeling suddenly tired out beyond belief. He noticed the ribbon poles, the harvest fires, the carts full of grain, and smiled. Ah, the last harvest night. He always slept the deepest tonight, after a successful venture that brought in all the food and heralded the celebrations of the following day.

There was a rustle, then a tumble and a crash, followed by a yelp. Annoyance rose in Stoick's stomach as he turned to find himself face to face with his son, now twelve years old, who had stumbled sleepily on his own feet and fallen into the wheelbarrow he had been pushing along. As soon as he'd managed to untangle himself from the rope and scraps of leather and stand on his spindly legs again, he spotted his father. The boy gave him a shy smile that only made him scowl at him in response. He'd been underfoot all day, trying to 'help', getting in the way and making messes. Why couldn't he be more like Spitelout's boy, dragging all the others behind him on rambunctious adventures, or like Hacknee's girl, always carrying that well crafted axe after her and throwing it at trees and things (and sometimes people) who took her fancy.

"Dad, hi dad!" he said, out of breath. There was a twinkle in his eyes, and that was never good.

"What have you been up to, boy?" he said, perhaps more gruffly than he meant. He was tired, and wished nothing more than a warm meal, and a bath if he was lucky, before collapsing into bed. His son gave a crooked smile, obviously a little put out by his father's impatience, but he ploughed on quickly getting as many words out in one breath as he could.

"Oh, I helped Gobber out shoeing all the yaks and making sure all the milk urns and churns are in order, and we made new rings for the barrels and then I got an idea, and Gobber liked it, and -"

"I've told you that you and 'ideas' aren't a good combination, son," he said, trying to be mild and sounding like he wanted to throttle the boy instead. Which wasn't a lie; why couldn't his son simply follow orders, do what he was told, be one of the rest, like all the young ones. They all acted out sometimes, but they were children. Hiccup on the other hand, was to be their leader one day. He was to command the village, was to have his every utterance listened to and obeyed without doubt or question; and couldn't even say two things after each other that made any sense at all.

Still, it was sad to see the twinkle go out of his son's eye and his shoulders sag. Stoick rubbed his face, and let out a sigh, and when he looked at his son again, there was a different look on his face. It was a sad one, of disappointed understanding but understanding nonetheless. At least, his boy was still smart, and understood his dad was just too busy and weary, sometimes.

"Tired, Dad?" he asked, almost gently. The twinkle was back in his eyes, but it was muted, and for the first time Stoick thought it looked just as tired. He nodded quietly, and Hiccup's weak close-mouthed smile grew larger. "I'll get you a bath ready while you eat at the mead hall, shall I?"

Looking at his son now, for a moment he glimpsed his beloved Val promising a night of quiet comfort after a hard day, with a small child looking up at his father in adoration. It had been a while since that blind love and admiration had been on his son's face. But all boys needed to grow up, and Hiccup was at least maturing, possibly faster than the rest of the children, at least in mind. He was proud of him, there; if only he could throw off this sequence of hair-brained nonsense.

"That would be a good idea." Hiccup's smile got even bigger.

"See, me and ideas aren't so bad together after all." Stoick's face fell into a warning frown again (no need to have a repeat of the chicken incident), and Hiccup wilted completely. But he smiled again anyway. "Maybe later, Dad?"

There was a glimpse of hope in his eyes that twisted Stoick's chest, making him see a three year old lad again asking the same question. He knew he wouldn't hear it later anyway, but there was no harm in saying a small white lie, wasn't there?

"Yeah, son. Later."

Hiccup's smile somehow became sad again but he nodded, turning to his wheelbarrow again. Hoisting it with more difficulty than Stoick cared to notice, Hiccup went back to wheeling his burden towards the forge, hopefully his last one for the day. That boy needed to eat more, but Stoick didn't often see him in the Hall, scarfing down food like he saw Snotlout and the Ingerman boy. He didn't have time to dwell on it; the boy was already on his way, and Stoick's stomach wasn't waiting for anyone. He always made sure to lave a large amount of food in the hall for Hiccup anyway, and come to think of it, they were running out of that jam he liked so much; he'd have to speak with Inga about another jar.

But his legs somehow took him home instead. He was sure he'd been heading for the Great Hall, but instead, he found himself pushing his own hall's door opened. Suddenly, there was an oppressive feeling on his chest, like a weight had been strapped to it. The house was dark and silent, creaking in the cold, late summer night. There was no fire in the grate, or sound to be heard anywhere, and that was somehow alarming.

Hiccup was supposed to be here, after all.

He went up the stairs, which all groaned under his weight, and the

darkness of the surroundings felt oppressive, making him wish he'd stoked the fire.

He pushed the door to his son's room, and the darkness swallowed him up. There was nothing in it apart from the bed and a few loose pieces of furniture. Then there was a letter on the bed, which Stoick saw his hand pick up, and open it, and then his son was there, fourteen years old, hair muted into brown with age, eyes tired and no smile at all.

"Sorry Dad. There won't be any later this time."

Stoick woke up with a start, body going stiff as he stared at the unfamiliar wooden ceiling above him. He forced himself to relax and see his surroundings, and then he remembered that there was a bandage around his head, and that therefore he was in the healer's hut. He sighed and lay back, feeling the oppressive sensation on his chest still pressing him down.

Later. He'd always told his boy he'd see him later, talked to him later, deal with him later after he cleaned up his messes. Until Hiccup got tired of waiting and took away that later Stoick didn't know he always counted on. He rubbed his forehead, encountering the bandage, and grumbled at himself. Well the stupid Goethi could say whatever she wanted; he wasn't going to stay in this stupid bed a minute longer. Too much time to think and remember regrets which did nobody any good. That stupid knot on his stomach just wouldn't go awayâ€¦

Stoick pushed himself up, and then blinked as he found himself staring at a terror which had curled up on his chest, and was now looking at him grumpily for moving too much. The thing blinked at him and rubbed its head against his coverlet, then whined at him, as if begging him to be its bed for a little longer.

"Gerrof me!" he growled at it, causing it to squeak and bolt. And then he got whacked on the hand with an 'ow!' and a glare from the elderly Goethi, who let the thing climb up her back and curl on her shoulder. Stoick looked at her open mouthed. "What, you _too_?"

"They keep out the rats."

Stoick stared. He hadn't heard the Goethi speak since he was a little boy, and she'd still had fiery red hair. He felt suddenly like he'd shed his years, and was in here because he'd fallen out of the tree again because Spitelout had bet him on it. Unfortunately, the reflection in the soup she shoved into his hand had too many wrinkles. He swallowed it down quickly.

"They also keep these old shoulders from aching." She scratched the beast under its blue coloured chin, and it purred, something Stoick hadn't any idea the creatures could do. "The boy was right about them being little bundles of warmth. And before you say anything." She pointed her staff right at him, teeth jangling on it noisily. "You're on about something, you and your men. And no one's come a-sneaking. I've figured it out on my own after you threw me out of my own house. I've not started speaking again for something small."

She glared at him, and even though she was old and rickety and he

could snap her like a twig, Stoick felt appropriately cowed. Their Goethi had been silent since one of the first and worse raids had left her a widow, her husband dying in her arms. There was no disrespecting the break of her vow of silence.

"Don't do foul by that boy, Stoick." A chill ran down his spine. Oh no, she couldn't mean â€¦ "He's planning to do great things for Berk. Great things that you will eventually approve of, too."

"Never," he hissed. Goethi shook her head.

"You will be proud to leave this village in his hands, when the time comes, Stoick. You must listen. If you don't, if you do something rash, not only will Berk suffer." She walked up beside him, sat on a tall stool, and looked him in the eye as she caressed the terrible terror still purring on her shoulder. "You will regret it for the rest of your days. You must listen to me, Stoick. I know you listen to me, and that is why I broke my vow to my dear old Earbone. I know he'll understand; but you must too, or it is all for naught. Do you, Stoick? Understand?"

Stoick for his part felt as if he'd been injured again as the room began reeling. The Goethi couldn't â€¦ she couldn't mean â€¦

"So what should I do," he choked out. "Just â€¦ just let him take Berk from me, when he tries? Should I just give it to him? The Haddock family has been leading this tribe since we first sailed here. We won the right in combat, like vikings; like men!"

"There's the problem with you, Stoick - you had too little women-folk in your life. That wee little lass that lives with you now isn't going to heal that breach," the Goethi replied consolingly.

"What about my boy?" he went on, feeling the very air in the room choke him. This couldn't be happening; first Gobber, his closest and most trusted friend. And now the Goethi, who he trusted blindly, breaking her own vow of silence to tell him to â€¦ to tell himâ€¦

"Stoick." Her voice was different. Quieter and more gentle, even over the rasp of disuse that had blanketed the whole conversation. She squeezed his shoulder, forcing him to look up at her. "Your guilt about what happened with your son is keeping you looking behind. You're stuck looking over your shoulder at the past, and you're missing the future that is unrolling before your feet. The path is changing, Stoick, and it is changing for the better. I can feel it in my old bones. And I can see it, too. Beyond that helmet he wears â€¦ there aren't really scars. Not the sort he's made us believe anyway."

"What do you mean?" Stoick said, mind sharpening slightly over his pounding head and chest and trying to make sense of her cryptic words.

"Try to look at him, Stoick. Not as a danger, aye? Not to try to see if he's a threat. Try to just look at him, as a lad. See what that tells you. If he doesn't know you're looking, so much the better for it. I'll let you out of here in a few hours anyway. You've hogged my best bed long enough."

It actually wrung a chuckle out of him.

"Now lay back, my lad. I still remember you as a wee bairn, and chief of this tribe or no, I won't let you out-death me. And not a word on this our conversation, hear me laddy?" She gave him a stink eye. "I'll not break my vow to my dear Earbone more than I have to, so this here tonight will be the one time I talk unless the signs force me to it again." She gave a chuckle. "Not to mention, it's so amusing to see Gobber try to decipher my writing."

"You don't always write sense, do you." Her eyes twinkled as she smiled silently. "And the nonsense is all on purpose. Ah, I knew it!"

The Goethi chuckled, shook her head and brought the blanket back up to his chin, placing the terror back to keep him warm as she turned once again to sorting her herbs. "You want too many answers, all together. And I know that is how you usually make your decisions as chief; look at it, get as much information about it as possible quickly, and then kill it. But this one â€¦ is not that straight forward. You will need to look at it for longer. If we have the time."

"What do you mean?" he asked, trying to rise again and sinking back sheepishly when she turned to give him a baleful look.

"Again, you've been too focused on seeing what you wanted to see with that boy. He's working frantically and tirelessly for a reason. He thinks we're going to get the guest of honour soon. So you need to be healed up good, my lad." She gave him a kind, wobbly smile. "Rest, now. You'll need it when I kick you out later."

He went down on his back with a sigh, the terrible terror curling up on his belly and rubbing its beak against his blanket again. With a hesitant hand, he dropped first a few fingers, then his whole palm on it, scratching lightly, like one would touch an ember to see if it still burned.

When it started to purr happily under his touch, something inside him tipped upside down. Here was a dragon, the scourge of his island home, purring happily to be petted, napping peacefully, and rubbing its head on his covers to give and receive comfort.

He was glad the Goethi didn't have anymore to say. He had a lot to think about.

=0=

Astrid walked into her mother's arms the moment she opened the door. Brunhilda, not sure what on earth had gotten into her usual self-contained daughter, shooed all those who were still awake out of the master bedroom and closed the door behind her.

"Tell me what it is, dear one," she told her when she had peeled Astrid out of her soaked tunic and into a new one. She handed her obviously distressed daughter a tankard of warmed, watered mead, and as she sipped it, patting at her sodden hair, Brunhilda saw some colour come back to her cheeks.

"Mum, if I tell you something, will you keep the secret for me? You

can't tell anyone." Brunhilda sighed, smiling at her daughter knowingly.

"You fell for him, darling? Should I give you some of my herbs?" she asked kindly. What little colour had climbed up her daughter's cheeks vanished, and the Viking woman bit her lip in chagrin. Her daughter was apparently taking her lack of loyalty towards her promised rather badly. The poor girl, she really saw things in black and white, the same way her dear father did. "Look, Astrid, you don't need to worry. You're a warrior, if you don't have your bride's blood no one will bat an eye with all the summersaults you do. And with the dragon riding now, it will be even less of a problem. As long as you drink these herbs I'll give you, you don't have to worry-"

"It's Hiccup." Brunhilda paused, looking at her daughter and waiting for her to continue. Astrid was staring at the small fire sitting between them - the only room in the Hofferson Hall to have a fire besides the main room. Holding the mug against her cheek and staring at the fire, Astrid looked miles away, like her mind had boarded the dragon and flown off into the sky. When she did look up at Brunhilda, she looked completely lost. "You know, the man you're hinting I slept with? Cattongue. It's actually Hiccup."

Brunhilda blinked at her.

"I'm not joking with you, mum. It's Hiccup. My â€¦ Berk's Hiccup." Astrid looked down, and there was obviously something else weighing her down. "He came back to help us, even though he still thinks we don't want him. Fishlegs figured it out, too. But â€¦"

"How did â€¦ how did you reach this conclusion?" she asked her daughter, rather too shocked to be able to think of any other question. Astrid reached around her neck and undid the silver pendent she always wore. Holding it up to the fire's light, she let the blue jewel inside shine.

"You know how I got this? Do you remember, when I told you and dad?" Brunhilda nodded, looking around the room to make sure there wasn't anyone there she hadn't seen. Astrid had been honest with her parents on the circumstances of Hiccup's departure, even if Hacknee had probably not told Stoick everything in order to protect his daughter. Astrid'd thought, at the time, that she was going to shame the Hofferson clan once her treatment of the chief's son became public, but even then she had refused to surrender the jewel to her father, saying that it was something she needed to keep, to remind herself of what she'd done. And Brunhilda hadn't needed to be told what that jewel had come to mean as Astrid had worked herself faint to buy the silver, and then taken to wearing it every day. Astrid was â€¦ she was Brunhilda's little girl no matter how old she got, the only girl-child amongst her seven boys and her husband. Astrid had often spoken of Hiccup before, even if only to complain about him, but Brunhilda had still remembered the first time she'd seen her daughter blush, and that had been after she'd punched the chief's son in the shoulder for calling her hair pretty. She remembered Val, giving her a twinkling look as they laughed.

Brunhilda watched as her same daughter, now old enough to be married five years over, pulled the jewel out of its casing.

"This isn't a precious stone," she said quietly. "It's a night fury

scale. I saw some that Toothless shed today and â€| they're identical. It got caught in my _kransen_ that day probably because they hit me while they took off from the forest. Mum, the one training dragons and riding a night fury around the islands teaching how to deal with them isn't some outsider we've met for the first time. It's our Hiccup."

Brunhilda finally nodded, letting her Astrid's words sink in. Some things began to make sense; Cattongue was always extra polite to the right people, seemed to have what she had thought to be an uncanny instinct for those who were important on their island. But he was stumped sometimes, and she suddenly realised that it was always things that had been added since he left. The new mill he'd stopped to stare at yesterday. The newer children, whose names it took him a while longer to learn.

How he looked at her own Astrid. Ah; that made sense.

"Mum, I need your advice," Astrid started quietly. Her daughter bit her lip, taking another sip of mead before she went on. "Fishlegs said he's not ready to tell everyoneâ€| I think so too. I already feel bad about telling you, but â€| I know you won't tell. Right?" Brunhilda nodded. "Even dad?" She sighed, but nodded again. She'd reserve judgement on that one later. "Mumâ€| I want to speak to him. You know how much I have to say to him, but I want to speak to _him_. Not his silly helmet or the stupid name he took up â€|"

Something in Brunhilda's chest broke as she saw her daughter stop to stare at the flames and smile fondly. Ah, her poor little girl. It had finally happened to her too.

With a sigh Astrid rubbed her forehead and looked up again. "Should I, mum? Should I tell him that I know, and speak to him?"

"Dear, you need to do what you must," she told her calmly, reaching across the fire and clasping her shoulder. Astrid nodded. "Tell him his secret is safe with you. Assure him that you mean him no harm. And then give him a good snog." Astrid didn't even snort at that, so Brunhilda gave her shoulder another squeeze. "What is it?"

"What if I run him off the island again?" she said, her voice more quiet than her little girl had ever been. Only Brunhilda really knew what an impact Astrid's guilt had had on her, and how many nights she had trained herself into exhaustion in order to forget what she perceived to be the most cruel act of her life. "What if he can't trust me, and the moment he finds out I know, he â€|"

"You won't, dear. Not if you're honest and upfront. But for safety, best grab ahold of him good so he doesn't run away, right?" Brunhilda smiled consolingly, moving to sit beside her and drag her into a hug, undoing her hair and brushing her fingers through as she used to when her little girl was nothing more than a wee bairn. Astrid sighed into her embrace, finally sagging as she let go of her worry and tension.

"I'm going to try it then, mum," she whispered, some determination bleeding back into her voice. Brunhilda smiled and kissed her daughter's crown.

"That's the spirit. Go get him, and give that butt of his a good grab

while you're at it. It's legitimately yours after all, with the down-payment already made!" This time, Astrid did snort. Brunhilda smiled in satisfaction as she held her daughter close, rubbing her arms and kissing her crown affectionately again.

Well, what do you know. The buns of steel were going to join the family after all.

=0=

****I'm so sad for Stoick. What happened to him could really happen to everyone. People who are parents can feel him; parents are expected to be these superhuman perfect beings, because that's how their children see them, but really, they're just as human as everyone else. Your mistakes just look bigger, because to someone very small, you're the whole world.**
>

****And I'm sure you are all incredibly chuffed that Astrid finally knows. Of course, no, Fishlegs knowing did not come out of left field. I left clues early on leading to an off-screen realisation by our smart Viking. I won't say were, because a number of you have asked for a sort of run-down of hidden clues, and I'll give them in the the last chapter.****

****Incidentally, if you would like to have anything cleared, list it in the comments, as well as your guesses about the clues. I'll address them in the footnotes of the last chapter.****

****This fic updates Tuesday and Friday. It is already written, and will contain 21 chapters.****

16. Day 6

****Whopping huge chapter, within which many things happen.****

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1</p>

**Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir**

* * *

><p>Day 6</p>

It was barely dawn, and he was stretching, yawning behind his helmet and having the little freedom of a solitary walk. Toothless had remained curled up beside the forge's hearth this morning, something he'd done both mornings they'd stayed in Gobber's forge. There was an amazing amount of things to do, still, despite the village having almost all preparations in place. He was on his way to Troll Peak now, to make the last checks on the mechanisms and especially the metal sheets they had placed there. The steel forged with a gronkle's breath was almost unbreakable and didn't rust easily, but if any wild dragon had decided to like the shine of it and nest there, or turn it into a chew toy, they would be in trouble; he didn't have time to make extras, not when he didn't know how long he had.

A well of good old panic pooled in his stomach, and he smothered it with another stretch and then clapping the last bits of his repaired armour on his shoulders as he yawned his way towards the woods. It was dawning to be a cold, overcast day, but the clouds were broken by the occasional glimpse of blue sky, and the sunrise was cool, but almost clear, and beautiful. Rising up the crest of the hill, passing beside what used to be his hall (and trying not to look at it too hard), he saw the line of golden sunlight siding the crest of the hill with him, sending his shadow boldly onto the ground. He stopped to look back at the sunrise at the top, and it took his breath away for a moment as the light twinkled on the ocean and the ice more beautifully than any precious stone or metal he'd ever seen.

It was a moment of wonder, and as he breathed in the sea air from the hill where he had lived most of his life, he felt like he'd returned home for the first time since he'd landed on Berk. It was an odd, disjoint feeling, but it was a good one, and he savoured it for the moment.

"Hi, Hiccup."

A shiver ran up his back as he whipped around, and found Astrid staring at him from the back wall of his old home, lying against the door he'd used so often to escape into the forest as a boy. She was wearing her furred clothing, her hair was down, and as the sunrise's light rose to touch her toes, the glow of it made her cheeks vibrate with colour and her hair shine gold.

Thor, she was so beautiful she made him stupid without even trying.

"Hiccup," she said again in a quiet voice that carried in the morning silence. "Take your helmet off?"

Another shudder went up his spine, and the haze of stupidity that had taken over his brain lifted like a cold bucket of snow water dumped over his head. Freya's mercy, _she'd called him Hiccup_.

"Hofferson, what -"

"Please," she said, pushing off the wall and stepping towards him. It took all of his willpower not to step away from her - that would be a dead giveaway. Sweat began to accumulate at the back of his neck as his heart rate increased, and it wasn't only because she stepped as close to him as she had been since they rode Toothless together on dragon island, with her breath ghosting over his chest armour.

"Just stop pretending. I know it's you, ok? I figured it out." Her hand reached out and he stiffened, grabbing her wrist when she went for the helmet's edge against his chin. Her expression turned stormy and her chin jutted out - which was a clearer sign that her patience was finishing than the hand he was holding turning into a fist. "I'm serious, Hiccup. Just stop. Just -"

Hiccup blinked as something rippled across her face and her voice broke. With a slight start, he remembered all the wistful regret she'd always had when she spoke of 'Hiccup' to someone she thought was a stranger to her, and all the things Thuggory had told him. He remembered how much he'd enjoyed spending the last few afternoons with her. More than anything, he remembered how hard she could knee

you in the crotch when said bony part of her came up against the softer part of him. He let her go quickly, breathing rather more hard than her subtle threat warranted, and swallowing hard to try to get himself to focus. She didn't let him go far, however. She grabbed the edge of his armour against his neck, digging her fingers down his chest to hold him in place. Thor and Odin help him, but in that moment, she reminded him of the girl he used to play with as a child, who had been his closest friend, who knew him so well she had once tried to count his freckles. But she also reminded him of Astrid, the girl he used to look at from the forge window. It was all a jumbled mess inside him as his chest roiled and he swallowed hard. She didn't speak again, but she looked him straight in the eyes, unblinking.

With a tight chest that didn't let him sigh in defeat, he reached a slightly unsteady hand behind him and pulled the back-guards up from the back of the helmet before pulling it off his face. Astrid took it from him with her free hand, letting it drop onto the grass. Her eyes had gone wide as she traced his face, her mouth opening without words a few times. For his part, his throat was so clogged up with tension, and fear and a jumble of other emotions that were born of having her face that close to him that he hoped she wasn't counting on him to say anything, because-

Her fingers rose up and traced the scars that ran up his cheek, a continuation of the scar tissue that also ran down his chest, a pleasant memory of his encounter with the Picts. The feel of her finger-pads on his face was so incredible he realised he'd closed his eyes to it only after he'd reopened them again, swallowing hard and blinking.

"Well, at least you do have scars," she said with a half smile, her loose hair flitting around and catching the rising line of sunlight. Gods, her hair was loose, he could just reach out and run his fingers through it. Odin knew it had been a personal fantasy of his for â€| he didn't remember how long â€| he should say something â€| and was that his hand rising and aiming for her hair?

"That's what the Picts gave me for riding the spawn of their underworld. Also known as Toothless, the incredibly playful night fury."

Her eyes went half-lidded and her eyebrows rose.

"You still have the sense of humour, at least," she said in a sardonic tone. Then she suddenly pulled back and swung, bringing a fist hard against his lower abdomen just under the hard leather armour. The wind was knocked right out of him as she smashed his diaphragme into his ribs and he bent forward, ending up face first against her shoulder. Yes, yes; this was definitely Astrid. The noises of agony that were coming out of his mouth were high pitched and undignified, but he choked a few vocalisations that must have sounded enough like 'what in Odin's beard?!' for her to give him an answer.

"That was for all the lies," she growled. "And for hearing all I had to tell 'Hiccup' and pretending it wasn't humiliating for me, and pretending you cared as Cattongue the Quiet went all around Berk, fooling everyone into thinking they didn't know him, listening to conversations he should have heard as someone else, and not giving

people an _answer_ they deserve!"

He was gasping, still, unable to hold his aching chest because she was in the way of his arms. And then suddenly Astrid's arms were around his back, fingers climbing the back of his neck as her arms dug into his armpits, pushing him straight with a wince as she buried her face against his neck. Hiccup went rigid, what little breath he had regained left his lungs again as he suddenly found himself with a front-full of Astrid Hofferson pressed up against him, and the ache in his lower abdomen faded in comparison to the jumbled mess that erupted higher in his chest.

"And â€¦ and what's this for?" he asked lamely, lost and hopelessly confused. Her frame trembled and she snorted a second later.

"You haven't changed at all, haven't you?" she asked, her voice more unsteady than he'd ever heard Astrid Hofferson speak. "Still cracking the stupid jokes at the most uncomfortable moments to make things even more uncomfortable."

"I â€¦ erâ€¦" was that a compliment, or an insult? Why was he even asking himself that when Astrid was _hugging him_. She was _hugging him_.

"This isn't for you," she whispered against his neck before burying her face farther into his chest, and his throat clogged completely when he heard her shaky, sob-like breath.

Astrid Hofferson, the woman he'd dreamed about for what felt like most of his life, wasn't only hugging him but she was also doing something he thought her incapable of doing unless it was in the most dire circumstances; she was getting emotional - about _him_.

Thor almighty, Ragnarok was coming.

"Oh," was the only thing he could answer, as his arms hesitantly rose to rest on her shoulders, not quite sure it was ok for him to touch her back. Emotional or not, she had proved many times over that she was still the girl he'd known from his boyhood, both the dear friend and the distant, driven girl, and was very capable of breaking his arm if he did something she didn't like. When no further pain happened he took another deep swallow and let himself embrace her. Just as he let his face sink into her hair (how many nights had he dreamed this, _how many_?) he could have sworn she smelled him in herself.

"Alright, Hiccup Haddock, there are a number of things I need to tell you. Some of them I told you already, but â€¦ I need to tell _Hiccup Haddock_. Not Cat tongue. Are â€¦ are you listening?"

"Yeah," he said, simply savouring the fact that he was holding her close, she knew it was him, and she hadn't killed him for it. Yet.

"Right, well, the first one is â€¦ I'm sorry. I didn't mean any of the things I said that day. I was tired, and sore, and in pain, and â€¦ a little scared because we'd almost been eaten by that nadder. I didn't mean it, and your dad _isn't_ ashamed of you."

He couldn't vocalise an answer for a while, but he did manage a

snort.

"I mean it, Hiccup. He's really missed you. Thinking he may have driven you away really hurt him, and â€¦ he's been working really hard so that when you came back, he'd be a better dad for you. He's really trying." He didn't answer, just put his forehead against her shoulder and nodded. The smell of her and her hair rose into his nostrils like a cloying perfume, and he couldn't make himself mind that his head got more than a little clogged.

"I â€¦"

"Please let me finish," she said, her voice riding the razor edge between an order and a plea. He realised that this was the second time she'd said please in this conversation, and feeling slightly bold, he squeezed her to him and nodded against her head. She turned her face so that her mouth was against his ear.

"Look, I don't know if you've â€¦ heard, or realised, but - er, right. I told you myself." He felt her swallowing just as hard as he had, and his courage rose even further at her nervousness, making him feel the need to reassure her and (if she knew, she'd kill him) protect her and make her feel better. So with slightly hesitant hands, he began rubbing her back up and down, and his chest swelling with what he suspected was his rising heart-rate as she sagged against him.

"Ok â€¦ We should talk about the fact that we're â€¦" He had never heard Astrid stutter before, and began rubbing her back in circles. Her fingers climbed higher up his back again until they well were slowly drifting through the thinner hairs at the base of his neck, making him bite his tongue to avoid making any noises he'd get kicked in the groin for. She finally took a deep breath, fisted her hands (taking a few tiny hairs with them, making him suppress a different sort of noise) and spoke on. "Look, you know there's an arrangement. Between us."

It was Hiccup's turn to go rigid now; oh, right, that. He nodded, and kept rubbing her back. He'd learned to keep quiet over his times of solitude on his island - both Toothless and he were social creatures, and they'd learned to read each other to perfection over their time together, but he's also learned the value of silence - and of shutting up to let other people hang themselves with their own rope as he dealt with the village chiefs and top generals.

In this case â€¦ in this case he was just waiting for her to say what she wanted. And maybe hoping, a little bit.

"I've put in a clause in the contract, so that if you came back married you were free of me. But since you didn't â€¦ it's official, now." She didn't sound too happy about that, and his gut went down to visit his boots. Still, he kept rubbing her back, biding his time before he answered, waiting for her to say more. "But if you want to go, Hiccup, I won't say a word. No one but me and Fishlegs know, and â€¦ we can keep it that way, if you want. If you decide to stay, I'll be happy, Hiccup. I'll be really happy." ...Gods, really? "But if you got used to life out there and don't want to come back â€¦ we'll keep going here. And I'm engaged to you, it's my duty to be by you but â€¦ only if you want to."

Duty? If he wanted to? That brought him right back down to earth. She was leaving it up to him to choose if â€¦ "I always thought you'd be a shield maiden," he said wryly, holding her closer when she tried to move away. "That's not to say I didn't look out of the forge window and gawp every time you passed - OW!"

"Still a wuss," she chuckled against neck, smoothing the hair she had pulled at his nape. The feeling made him want to shudder again, and since she couldn't see, he allowed himself to close his eyes and savour an instant of a rather more racey fantasy. He was going to have to pass by the cove and have a jump in the lake before he got to Troll Peak, unless he wanted to start fielding comments about the new enhanced belt he was wearing. "But I'm serious, Hiccup. If you want to go â€¦"

With a sigh, he finally pulled back, just enough to look her in the eyes. The sun had risen enough now that all her face was bathed in it where it wasn't shadowed by his own shoulder, and he was once again hit like Mjǫllnir that he was hugging the woman he'd been dreaming about since he was eleven years old. It took him a moment to remember that he wanted to talk, and another to remember what he wanted to talk about.

"I don't want â€¦ I don't want to go because of all â€¦ this," one of his hands rose to wave hesitantly between them. Astrid blinked and raised a brow, and Hiccup felt himself blush. He tried to move away, but she pinned him to her with both a look and her arms around his back. He felt his cheeks grow darker, but something inside him that he'd been keeping in for 5 years was desperately trying to claw itself out of his mouth, and at last, he let it. "Astrid, what will everyone think when they find out that five years ago I couldn't stay because I couldn't kill dragons?"

Her eyes widened, and he immediately regretted saying it. Now what he always feared would happen; she'd call him a coward, denounce him to the village, and he'd be chased out. He wasn't sure if he wanted to push her away or hold her tighter to stop her from running inside his dad's hall and yelling her opinion to a world he had only just started to regain. If he could call for Toothless they could do - take her somewhere - at least until this was over, and then -

"What do you mean, you left because â€¦" Her eyes suddenly went wide. "Of course, Toothless!" He nodded at her. "So â€¦ not because of me?" Not completely, but he didn't tell her that. The hope in her eyes vibrated somewhere in his chest like the noise of a great horn. He shook his head, and something on her face looked lighter. "You mean â€¦ of course. You shot him down during the last raid of that year, didn't you?" With a wry smile, he nodded again. "And then â€¦?"

"And then I found him in the woods, and I couldn't kill him. He looked frightened, terrified and so lonely, lying there." He was in that clearing again, with a sigh, his best friend's eyes looking at him with terrified pleading before he gave up and lay down, hoping for a quick death. "So I let him go instead. But the damage was done. He hasn't been able to fly without me since. Well, technically he can with the emergency rigging, but â€¦ he doesn't seem to want to."

"Maybe he was lonely," Astrid whispered, and he forced himself to look down at her to find her eyes shining up at him in the new

sunlight. There wasn't a trace of the judgemental expression he was expecting, or the anger and betrayal. "Is he why you got better in the ring?"

"Yeahâ€¦" he said with a chuckle of sheer relief, and feeling bold again, ran his hands once up and down her back. When she didn't stop smirking up at him, his own smile stretched a little farther. "Boy did it make you mad back then."

"It did," she said with a hushed laugh, then looked up at him sheepishly. "In fact, it made me so angry that I followed you that night, when you left me the letter. I almost caught you too. But you took off on Toothless before I could guess who you were talking to. You two actually knocked my ass over. Left me with this." He blinked as she held the silver pendent he'd often noticed while at once mourning the fact that one of her arms had come away from him. Without thinking, he touched the pendent when she put it back against her chest, and was gratified to see the resulting blush bloom around the pendent and rise up her neck to her face. He replaced his arm around her quickly, before she could move away. One arm seemed somehow unable to keep her in place, but he got a burst of gleeful butterflies in his gut to feel her rest against him as if she was not inclined to go anywhere. His eyes seemed unable to leave the pendent sparkling in the sunlight.

"Is that â€¦ a dragon scale?"

"Yes â€¦ one of Toothless', I guess." She smiled at him sheepishly again. He had never imagined Astrid's face with that expression, during all of his dreams and nights awake, thinking about her and what had become of her in the years he'd been away, he'd always seen her determined, fighting, grinding her teeth and roaring into battle axe raised. But he'd never seen her with this expression on, hair undone and teased by the wind, freckles in high relief against the golden morning sunlight. He realised that though he'd thought of her being married, he'd never really tried to visualise it. It hurt too much.

And now she was engaged, to him, and none too mad at being seen by him with her hair down and hugged like a lover in full view of the village square. Sure, she wasn't altogether convinced, perhaps, and she was leaving it up to him, possibly out of courtesy or kindness or â€¦ guilt. He remembered that emotion haunting her face at the forge.

But he could change her mind too, if they had the chance. And maybe, just maybe â€¦

"You â€¦ you had better keep ahold of that, then," he stammered, fingering her pendant again. Her eyes went wide as she searched his face, and he could clearly feel the colour on his face rise by another notch.

"You don't â€¦ want it back?" she asked tentatively. His smile widened.

"Don't see why. Toothless won't need it anymore and it looks great where it is," he answered. He'd never imagined he could make Astrid Hofferson smile like that, not since she'd suddenly quarreled with him as a child, and never told him why.

"Ok, so I'm definitely keeping this." There was a finality in her statement, like they'd sealed a contract. It brought a smile to his face even as she stepped away. "I have to go prepare for the day but â€| can we speak, later?"

"After the class, like yesterday?" he asked hopefully. He almost couldn't believe it.

"Something warm to eat, in the hall after?" she replied, almost sweetly. She was smiling. She was really smiling. For _him_.

"Yeah, yeah, sounds great."

The sun dimmed as soon as she nodded, having gone behind one of the many cloud blankets that stopped the day from being completely beautiful. If only in the sky. For Hiccup today was fucking _fantastic_.

"Right, so I have to go check the stuff at Troll Peak. I'll see you in the ring!"

"Wait!" she handed him his helmet, as he'd completely forgotten he didn't have it on. He gaped at it for a moment before looking at her again. She was grinning fondly. That was another look he had never even imagined. The smile on his face got wider and stupider, and she laughed.

"Don't spring all the traps!" she said, slapping his shoulder, and he quickly put the helmet on and sprinted towards the woods before he could make more of a fool of himself. He couldn't help turning and yelling, a 'see you later!' to which she answered with a shooing gesture.

He almost fell over his feet three times as he entered the treeline, and had to stop and lean against a sturdy oak a few feet in, because his knees were suddenly shaky.

Astrid knew. Astrid knew and didn't hate him. Astrid knew and _more_ than didn't hate him.

Thor and Odin â€| as soon as this was over, maybe, if he was lucky, he'd have something to come back to. Maybe if she was right, he'd have a _home_ again.

=0=

Snotlout's day had begun horribly. There was a massive, _horrible_ lizard in his bedroom, curled around his bed and breathing awful, putrid stench in his direction, making the room sweltering hot. What did he care if it had snowed outside, he was a man, and men didn't need built-in heaters to keep their feet warm. Real men had cold feet.

Then his father had woken him up before dawn, expecting him to lug firewood for the house while his lazy brothers-in-law got a later morning because they had _banged_ all night. Both his sisters had married in the last few years, and Snotlout often found himself hating their husbands as they tried to take his place on the table beside his father, or tried to ingratiate themselves with his mother

when they stayed over. They knew he would be the next head of household once his father passed, and they were trying to take his place, as they were both second and third sons within their own homes.

Well, too bad. And once he was chief, they'd get it too. He couldn't understand why they didn't stay in their respective halls anyway. What did he care of Gunfindle's hall was so small that his three children all share one bed? What did he care if his second sister's husband had his right arm amputated recently because they'd dropped the building weights on it in an accident, and Gerda was alone in their hall, because her husband's parents had passed? If they were well enough to shag, they were well enough to get back to their own damn place.

His mood soured further when the sun began rising, glinting blearily against what seemed like everything metal the village contained. A sleepless night after a day trying to work with that damned lizard hadn't been fun, and he was going to make sure no one else had fun today. It was only fair.

And speaking of fair, he'd get Fireworm to sit on that idiotic helmeted man today if it killed him; he was going to see how much he liked it when a ten-ton lizard squashed him like a bug - then again, Snotlout could take it. He could come out from under her with all his bones intact and walk away. Cattongue would probably be buried in the first plot of land they could get rid of him in; or scraped off the ground after exploding like an over-ripe grapefruit all over the arena.

The (wussy) man himself came into view as Snotlout came into the plaza, glinting like the rest of it with his stupid armour. Which real man needed full-body armour like that, with all those shiny metal bits poking out of coloured leather! And the Bog girl kept saying he was a lady-killer, HA! Snotlout would recognise a fellow like himself, and Cattongue the ugly scar monster certainly wasn't one!

Unlessâ€¦ what theâ€¦ Snotlout rubbed his eyes, and sure enough, a pair of arms were wound around the ugly-man's armour, fingers fiddling with the hair at his nape in a way that made Snotlout shudder and tingle all over. What theâ€¦ no, no no no, that wasn't fair at all! It didn't make sense. Women dug muscles, a good pair of hammies that could bench-press their weight in yaks. Notâ€¦ string bean men, in strange silly armour and a covered hideous face.

It was the dragon thing, Snotlout just knew it was the dragon thing. In he came riding a night fury like the unnatural, mad, crazy foreigner that he was, and yet somehow women seemed to dig that all of a sudden! Why, even Astridâ€¦

Snotlout's thought process stopped short as a suspicion bloomed in his brain and he looked harder at the scene. That Cattongue bastard was standing an awful lot close to Stoick's hut. And was there a glint of yellow hair or was it just a reflection? No, it couldn't be.

Then Cattongue moved away. Snotlout gaped, watching unbelieving as Astrid - no, really, hard-as-nails-Astrid, laughed and smiled and slapped him playfully and gave him the helmet. She saw his horrid

face then went and hugged him?

He wasn't stupid, he knew what that was. He'd seen both his sisters be married and courted, and he'd romanced a few of the girls himself for a good night's romp. This was not happening. She was supposed to stay available for him to nab up once Hiccup the Useless had been gone long enough to be passed over. He'd been waiting for her, strutting his stuff for years and refusing most of the offers he received, and this is how she repays him?

Snotlout saw red.

He was scaling the incline towards the house even as the other man left, and huffing like a mad bull as he shot like an arrow after the thinner man, planning to punch his head with no apologies or excuses.

"Snotlout, what â€¦" He ignored her, fuming at the nose in the cold morning air, crunching the snow under his boots savagely. How dare she - how dare he! They were making fun of him, carrying on behind everyone's back and pretending they were just talking, or just training, or just going to the healer, or just hugging in the middle of a post-battle field â€¦ ah, true, they hadn't even had the decency to be subtle about it!

"Snotlout!" He ignored her, and that was the only warning he got. He was just about to breach the tree-line when his stronger arm was wrenched back and moving forward would mean popping his shoulder out of its socket. He growled back at her and she pulled warningly.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" she hissed, coming close to his ear and being closer to him than she was in years. It only made him angrier as he remembered her fingers diving into that horrible man's hair, like a whore against a wall in the back alleys of the Capital he'd only heard of on the mainland.

The thought made him madder - what had they done? What had been the point of looking up at her and thinking she was the strongest and most beautiful when she let this â€¦ stranger do as he will with her. With a yell, he bucked her off, his arm giving a yelp of protest he barely felt in his anger. He turned and swung at her, and he swung again - she evaded every time, telling him to stop and growling at him, but he couldn't hear what she was saying, nor did he want to - she was a damned whore.

He finally got close enough to land a blow, but she ducked at the last minute. The hit still glanced her on the shoulder, and she was flung around, falling on her face with her hands shooting out catch herself as her legs stretched out in front of him. Her hair flopped in a whip of golden light over her shoulder in the newly risen sun.

That was when he realised that her hair was down, and the last of his reason fled him.

"You complete slut! You whore!" he yelled, grabbing her by the hair before she could react and beginning to drag her by it towards the plaza. Her call of pain let satisfaction bloom in his chest to mix with guilt and the feeling that he was doing something he was never

going to be able to take back.

A part of him was desperate to stop. The swell of desire not to dent a relationship he'd had since he was a tiny boy bubbled in his chest as she began yelling and flailing in both anger and pain as he took her over the rocky terrain of the path that traversed the grassy knoll they were descending from Stoick's hall. But there were suddenly people around them, staring, and if he let her go now without his rightful reason being known, it would retort against him, making him seem like the wronger instead of the wronged. It spurred him on to drag her on her back, still kicking out and yelling as she clawed at his hand fisted in her golden hair. He had had so many fantasies about touching the hair she had always kept tightly braided and here she was, letting it down for a foreigner while being engaged to another man.

"Snotlout, what are you doing!" That was Brunhilda, and bile rose up to his throat. But he stood straighter and finally flung Astrid down with such strength that her head bounced against the - thankfully - soft earth. The fact that she only half-rose slowly, shoulders shaking and hair obscuring her completely, made his breath catch in his throat, but he clung on to his rightful anger.

"Your daughter is a whore!" he called out boldly. All the people present gaped at him, some of them gasped. Brunhilda looked like her daggers were going to come out to play. A rush of defiance rose in his chest; she wouldn't be so riotous and defensive once she heard. "I just saw your daughter hugging that damn foreigner Cattongue, hair full down, right under the nose of our chief! In full view of the plaza she was, just standing there with no shame with her arms around the man and her hair out! It's a miracle she's not in her skivvies!"

"Hold your tongue!" someone called - Snotlout looked around and couldn't tell who it was until they spoke again, and then he gawped as the short Goethi stepped forward. He'd been convinced she was mute. The crowd parted for her, all looking at one another in askance. She did not speak again, but began scribbling, and everyone looked around for Gobber. Snotlout didn't have the patience for it.

"I know what I saw!" he yelled, frustration mounting that no one seemed to pay him any mind any more as they all tried to see what the Goethi wrote, craning their necks and looking at him dubiously. Spit gathered in his mouth as his stomach balked at the prospect of being labeled a liar after what he'd seen, clear as day; and he knew there were a few of them who were looking at Astrid's rising form with some sort of speculation. He couldn't have been the only one who saw how Cattongue tried to touch her so often. And Astrid - the stupid slut who let her hair down for a stranger, falling into his arms like a stupid brainless girl! - was rising off the ground into a crouch and looking at him murderously. A part of him had the decency to be terrified. Another simply became furious at her defiance; who did she think she was!

He snapped around, drawing his leg back before he could think, and planning full well to kick her in her stupid pretty face. He just had the time to see her eyes look at his foot and widen, too close and too rattled to react on time, before his face exploded in stars and pain. He realised he'd fallen only because his head bumped against

something that smelled like grass.

"What the fuc-"

He looked up, spitting blood, to see the bastard himself, Cattongue with his fist still out and trembling. He shot to his feet and Cattongue stood straighter, making Snotlout realise that he was a good half-head shorter than the man, and making his anger rise. His fist rose, and someone grabbed him from behind.

"What the hell is wrong with you, to attack a woman like that!" Cattongue yelled.

"She's a bloody slut!" he spit, feeling himself sound like a broken record. Cattongue swelled farther, and Snotlout snapped at him with satisfaction, "Look at you, defending her and proving my point!"

"I merely did what any sane man would do in view of a mad one!" he growled back, and he turned to look at the crowd that had surrounded them by now with such contempt that it was felt through his helmet. A growl announced the night fury's arrival that bucked its way through the people, throwing those who didn't get out its way fast enough onto the ground. The luminous green eyes traversed with angry black slits set a cold sweat down Snotlout's back, and the crowd suddenly felt like an impediment to escape instead of support to him.

"What's going on here!"

Stoick came down the hill, people parting for him too with the same alacrity as they did for the night fury. The creature growled, but subsided once the bastard put a palm on its nose. How did the bastard _do_ that?

No time like the present. "I saw these two-" he waved a hand towards Cattongue and Astrid, who had stood behind the ugly-man and was looking at him like she wanted to skin him with a salt dagger "-behind your hut, under your nose, Sir. They were entangled, and Astrid had let her hair down for him."

"What!" she screamed.

"Dragon shit," Cattongue hissed. "What proof do you have."

"My own eyes! I'm a Jorgensen, my father is a general of his village! I wouldn't lie on this!"

The crowd murmured. Cattongue seemed to grow even angrier.

"If you must know," he hissed, and the crowd quieted instantly, as if they'd suddenly realised they were facing a venomous, angry snake. The mental analogy pleased Snotlout and he almost smirked. "We spoke of Hiccup, her _promised_. If anyone has the right to shame her it is either Stoick, her father or Hiccup, and he would _never_!"

"What do you know of him?" Snotlout sneered.

"I know him well enough, we've shared a forge, and I was assuring Astrid that he's alive and well. And that he *is*!" he looked back at her, though her eyes were fixed on Snotlout with a promise of death three dragon-hides thick. "...he cares for her, and Berk. The last I

know; he was ready to be back, soon. Though," he turned to Snotlout stonily, "I think he'd be less inclined to return if he saw all this." Now Astrid looked at Cattongue with a look that Snotlout would almost call terrified if traces of pure anger weren't mixed in healthy quantities.

"My son said that?" Stoick asked, voice steady as he came further forward. Cattongue nodded.

"When I spoke with Astrid of it, she was moved. I was merely reassuring her."

"And are you reassured?" Snotlout asked with a sneer, "with your fingers in his hair and your hair down!"

"You dragged me down the hill by it, of course it came loose!"

Oh, fuck. She'd managed to turn the tables on him, and there was no way he could prove otherwise but his word, and by the murmuring and looks he was getting, it wasn't looking good at all.

"Still, the matter needs to be sorted," Stoick said gruffly. "The accusation is a grave one, and it is an insult to me personally as well." Aha, look at him now, the brave Dragon-man! It was slight, but Cattongue had flinched, and Snotlout had seen it. "We must go to the hall, discuss the matter there."

"Sir," Cattongue replied. "I will do as you require." But Snotlout saw him glance at the forest; he was going to escape, the great hero, looking for ways to high tail it into the forest! Let him, so the people of Berk would see him for the coward he was.

"Very well, then," Stoick continued. "Let's take it to the Mead hall and see what we can conclude the-"

A call interrupted him. As one, everyone turned to look towards the sky to see a number of dragons descending. Weapons were fingered as shoulders tensed, until another call, this time a recognisably breathless ahoy, was heard from ATOP the dragon.

Within moments, two gronkles and one nadder had landed beside the crowd, and Dogsbreath was the third person who parted the circle of people, reaching for Cattongue with fatigued, breathless motions as he waved his hand behind him vehemently.

"What is it?" Cattongue asked, urgently. Dogsbreath rested an outstretched arm on Cattongue's shoulder as the thinner man held him up. Once some of his breath had been recovered, he looked up with a mask of worry on his features.

"It's coming. We spotted it on the way here, a massive stain on the ocean surface. It's barely a day behind us."

Calls erupted, then almost panic, before Stoick and Cattongue yelled for calm at the same instant. They looked at one another, and Cattongue bowed a head to their chief.

"We knew it was coming! This is an advantage we were not planning on - now we know when it will be here in advance, and can prepare. Cattongue, what is the situation at Troll's Peak!"

"I was just on my way to check before this business broke out." Cattongue turned to his dragon and mounted. "With your permission, I'd like to go there quickly to make sure everything is in order. Our defences should be ready. But when I am back, I would like to give all those who are mounted as much training as we can afford."

"We'll come with you!" Thuggory and the others were descending the hill, the Bog girl already on her dragon. Tuffnut, that traitor was walking up on his zippleback's head, and - was that _Ruffnut the mum_ sitting right next to him on the other head?!

"You're going to need all the help you can get!" the Bog girl called out. Thuggory's wife, whatever she was called, mounted her nadder, and suddenly Astrid was mounting her own and a number of others who had acquired one quickly followed suit. Cattongue looked around at them, then turned to Stoick.

"Sir?" he asked.

Stoick nodded. "Be back as soon as you can. I want you to report to me and the council." Cattongue nodded at him. "Men! Gather at the sentry points! I want a lookout on every Thor forsaken rock jutting out into the water. Ugly-Thug, which direction was it coming from!"

"Due East, straight from the isle!" was the yelled reply as the stupid Cattongue the Idiot began to bark _orders_ at the mounted forces, organising them into ranks - which they fell into without question. Snotlout growled when his own dragon came up to him and gave him a nudge, and turned away from her. The last time there was a battle, she had betrayed him and ridden out without him. He wouldn't trust her again. With determination, he moved towards his father and the other men about to gather into the hall.

"Dot the rocks with men and make sure to look at every inch of the horizon! Council, to the hall. Cattongue!"

"Sir!" With a salute, the bastard was off, and all the ones mounting dragons rose after him. Fireworm gave him a moan, but he ignored her and stood beside her father.

"Not going, son?"

"That _thing_ took off on its own during the raid; it can do that again for all I care," he replied in a bored tone. Fireworm gave him a sad croon which tugged at his chest, but he ignored it. Real men didn't fall for the begging of a giant lizard's yellow eyes.

"Very well then, hush up and come in. You have to tell me what happened; and then you're going to make yourself useful with the women and children."

"What?!" he yelped. "No way, even Ruffnut's out there!"

"Yeah, and she's left her daughter with Fishleg's mother, so it's your duty to look to them, since you don't have a woman and child of your own."

Snotlout's mood darkened further as he trudged after his father,

ignoring anything else he said.

=0=

Ruffnut was in heaven.

Well, she had been in heaven until Tuffnut the horribly idiot-headed_ opened his mouth.

"You can't be out here too! What will happen to our little girl if we both die a horrible, roasty and crispy death!"

Her idiot-headed brother who had told her husband that she was on the dragon with him.

"Fishlegs."

" ...and then they'll take her to the matron, and the matron will decide who will take care of her â€|"

"Fishlegs!"

" â€| they don't know she likes her feet tickled, and that the sound of sloshing liquid always makes her giggle, and that-"

"FISHLEGS!"

Cattongue swooped in, the night fury (how awesome was that!_) turning its body like it was made of black water and then sleekly cutting the air beside their three flying dragons. Great, so her husband hadn't learned to shut up when the wife spoke yet, but did it when someone else called? She needed to train him better.

"I need you to tell me what you think of that."

There was a giant â€| dome-like woven thing being wheeled to the edge of the two cliffs that made up the entrance to the beach hidden at the bottom of a sheer, flat-rocked chalk drop from Troll's peak. The beach itself was a perfect crescent moon of white chalk sand, the broad side snug against the rocks of the Peak, then disappearing gradually into the emerald coloured water. The part of her that had learned the value of looking at things of nature from her dear husband was almost sad to see this almost-perfect thing about to be destroyed. The part that was pure-Ruffnut was gleefully anticipating the massive explosions and eager to see what new shape it would take.

"Is that â€|" Fishlegs' jaw dropped, and Ruffnut knew him well enough now to nudge her brother on the adjacent dragon head and direct their own ride to follow the other two. Her sweet little gas-monster (the fourth one; the first three were Fishlegs, her baby, and his dragon, in that order) had taken to her well, not really having bonded with her other sibling at all. Ruffnut knew she'd be more comfortable if she could share a dragon with anyone else, but then again, Tuffnut did tend to understand the more destructive side of her. And this battle was going to be the mother of all destruction. Ruffnut still had no idea what those two were talking about, however.

"Yeah," she could hear Cattongue say over the wind that always licked

at you in this place. The beach below, by contrast, was almost always stagnant and windless, but as soon as you climbed to the peak, the strong air currents always threatened to swallow you up or throw you back down. "That's what I'm counting on. If it worked on the fastest dragon in creation, it can work on the largest one."

"What?" she heard Tuffnut yell.

Cattongue seemed to falter in his landing of the black dragon, who promptly glared up at him and gave him a wallop with a wing. Awesome, she had to teach the zippleback to do that to her brother.

"That thing should be big enough to trap, or at least slow the Red Death down."

Red Death. Gods, she loved her husband. He came up with such _awesome_ names all of Berk approved of them.

Now if only he'd name their _baby_.

"Will it launch like the nets?" Fishlegs asked as they all dismounted, and her husband walked up to the complicated looking machinery. She grabbed a rock and promptly smashed it into her brother's head, which made him collapse momentarily. When the other two men looked back at her, she shrugged.

"He was getting the urge to come there and break it," she said. Fishlegs nodded in understanding he'd gained through habit, while Cattongue shook his head with a snorted chuckle that sounded â€| oddly familiar. Where in Hel's realm â€|

"Anyway, this will only hold it back for a while. It launches re-inforced â€|" Ruffnut zoned them out, stepping on her brother purposefully as she moved as close to the cliff edge as she dared to watch the rest of the preparations. She would usually be wary of her brother stalking up behind her, but since Fishlegs showed exactly how he took someone hurting his wife on Snotlout, he'd toned it down considerably. Damn it all.

Still, this was entertaining to watch without distractions. The far side was littered with stacked up leaves and bushes that were only planted there as a fake, because she'd been here many times and they'd never been there before. On the side closest to her, however, she could see exactly what was going on as vikings packed twigs of mint and lavender around various bits of equipment, pots that are being filled with yellowish tinkling crystals and other strange stuff she didn't know. Eager, fidgety dragons were nudging their humans, pretty much like her zippleback head was nudging its way into her side, and she pet it under one if its numerous chin fringes, making it rumble with its eyes falling shut.

"Oh, look at that, that's wicked!" Tuffnut snickers on her other side, and she turned to look at the direction that had him so diverted, but couldn't see anything but bushes.

"What's eaten your brain? The trees are wicked now?"

"No! It's the sharp, pointy-"

"That's perfect!" Fishlegs yelled, his voice almost squeaky with his

excitement. Ruffnut slapped her forehead at her husband, putting the task of training him out of that on her list, too. How could a man of his size and girth have a voice like _that_? And speaking of size and girth, there were a couple of bushes that really looking private back thereâ€¦

"Oi, Fishlegs," she called, interrupting whatever involved conversation the two men were having as she spotted Astrid about to fly over, her nadder hovering in tight circles as a riderless nightmare followed her dragon listlessly. Perfect, she could distract her brother and the night fury guy. Whatever his name was. She was too distracted by her good-looking-husband-who-may-be-in-Valhalla-later to care. She couldn't let the last nookie of her life pass her by after all. "I've got a cramp," she said, looking at him purposefully and feeling that now-usual sense of accomplishment when he went crimson and started looking at her in _that_ way.

Yeah, her husband was smart, _and_ awesome. To the bushes it was.

"Let me help you with that. I'll be back in a bit; my wife needs some help," he said to Cat tongue, who seemed too awkward when he nodded and moved to let them pass not to have caught on - but she couldn't care less, not really. The only problem she was going to have is that she was going to have to be quiet.

Then again, the thrill of possibly being caught may make this the best nookie of their lives. She just prayed to Freya and her brother that it didn't have to be their last.

=0=

Astrid landed and dismounted right away, walking up to Hiccup worriedly as the nightmare flopped on the grassy head of the cliff that looked remarkably like a grouchy Troll, naming the promontory.

"I think that's Fireworm," she said quietly, irrationally glad and at once irritated at Tuffnut's presence a few steps away, flat on his belly as he looked at the opposite wall surrounding the gorge which contained the beach. He could stave the gossip her talking to Hiccup might spur, but he was also â€¦ in the way.

Why was she so desperate to drag him to a quiet spot all of a sudden? She didn't even know what she would do. She's said all she thought she wanted to say this morning already. But then Snotlout went and pulled that spectacularly stupid move, and it left her somehow â€¦ wanting to explain, and to talk. And just to have those moments in the sun she had this morning all over again.

The overcast sky rumbled, as if to mock her. Summer was drawing to a definite close. And with the massive dragon, or Red Death as Fishlegs had named it, literally looming on the horizon, everything felt breathlessly on the cusp of nothingness.

Hiccup, meanwhile, seemed to be entirely focussed on the logistics of the situation and was frowning just as thunderously at the grass while he absently petted the upset nightmare, forever ignoring social awkwardness when he needed to forge ahead with his plans. At least

that hadn't changed completely in him - she clearly remembered him cracking a joke on people's weight after he'd cost them half their supplies for the Winter that year, such a long time ago.

Now, it was just a subtle change - instead of being too distractingly focussed on how to break things to care about the social uppity rules they lived in, he was too focussed on how to fix them. All in all, it was a change she could embrace in him, especially since now that she was looking, almost all of him was still the Hiccup she remembered from her childhood and the one she'd missed dearly.

"We can't afford even a single rider not being up, even if its Snotlout." He turned to the dragon. "You dropped him in the raid. I noticed that. I think he hasn't forgiven you yet." Fireworm moaned pathetically, hiding her head under her wing. Astrid felt it tug at her heart, and her nadder gently placed her bony chin on Astrid's shoulder. The girl suddenly felt awful for having delayed naming her dragon for so long, when even Snotlout had - and she suddenly understood Fishlegs perfectly. Something felt final about giving her nadder a name. Once she did, there was no going back.

Hiccup sighed, and then nodded to himself.

"Tuffnut!"

The male twin had still been lying on his belly, using a strange instrument against his eye - a spy glass! That was one of Hiccup's tool pieces, one of which she'd hoarded away from Gobber's into her pouch. But she didn't have time to be upset about the theft as Hiccup gave clear, crisp and no-nonsense orders, taking out a few small pieces of parchment and scribbling things down in charcoal, and barking at Tuffnut to get each one to the right person, ASAP, or else, and that he could keep the spy glass on condition that he would not touch anything until he returned.

Astrid suddenly had the very distinct impression that she was watching either a scene from the past with Stoick's early chieftain years, or a scene from the future. She wasn't sure which one she liked best of those two ideas.

They were up in the air again shortly, Fireworm following eagerly as they zoomed towards the village. Ever the cautious planner, Hiccup passes them through a waterfall, and Astrid only realises that it was to wash off an lingering traces of the scent mark seconds after she opens her mouth to yell at him for the freezing bath. The next second, the unfamiliar feeling in her chest was back with a vengeance at his steadfast care and thoughtfulness as she looked at him almost hovering on Toothless' back through the wind resistance, standing in his stirrups as he flattened himself against his hand controls. She spurred her dragon forward, praying to all the gods that the sudden surge of competitive spirit she felt right then would have an outlet later, when she was free to roam the skies with him and race him to places unimportant.

When they landed in the Berk plaza, the situation they found couldn't have been more different to that of a normal late summer morning. No one was pandering their wares or cleaning their homes. On the contrary, pre-packed weapons and supplies were being hauled away, both in wagons and in carts built only yesterday to be handled by two dragons as they flew towards the safety of the hidden beach. Activity

stopped for a moment as the night fury's characteristic scream cut the air, causing a few to duck down and some others to run up.

"I need to find Snotlout," Hiccup said without preamble. Astrid was down beside him in an instant, and couldn't help but notice a few of the fidgeting feet and eyes as the people gathered around glanced between them and their friends.

Dear gods, Snotlout's accusations had done more damage than she had thought possible. And they didn't have the time to fix any of it.

"We have to get Fireworm to him," Hiccup went on, again willfully ignoring all the social awkwardness happening around him in the name of the situation's logistics. "I need all the riders accounted for and in the air doing their assigned jobs. Where is he?"

"I think Spitelout had him go with the women. The council went with them to make sure the hideout is secure." Phlegma answered. That would almost be hilarious if it didn't make Hiccup growl so horribly. Astrid still wasn't used to angry Hiccup. Somehow, it was fascinating; she'd have to prod at it later.

"That is not what I told Snotlout to do!" he grumbled in a voice that was almost recognisably his own. "I need him in position!"

"I'll take you there," Astrid sighed, and murmuring erupted among the people. Phlegma gave her a startled look, and Burp the Baker looked like he was about to panic. Hiccup proved not to be as oblivious as he'd previously appeared to be when he yelled in frustration and yanked his helmet off.

"For the last time! We don't have time for this! Astrid is not breaking her contract. Especially not with me!" He slammed his helmet back on, slapping the plates in place from behind; growled again. "Let's just go!" He took off, obviously not needing directions.

Astrid looked after him for a moment, and then spared a glance at the crowd in the plaza. Some of them had expressions of shocked startlement, others of confusions, still others of anger. Phlegma had her eyes wide and suspiciously shiny, both hands pressed to her mouth. She had definitely noticed. When Astrid caught her eye, she put a finger to her lips and then pointed to the rest beseechingly. Phlegma blinked, then nodded, and with a grateful bob of her head Astrid followed after Hiccup.

Hiccup was already fielding questions at the beach when she caught up to him, and Stoick was trying to contain his fury at the island's secret hideout being breached.

"Sir, I swear on my honour and on everything I hold dear that I have no use and no reason to betray this information. But I need Snotlout to be where I told him to be; he's to switch the braziers off, and he's Thuggory's backup, and Hoark just isn't enough on his own on that end. Hoark has a family, and children; he needs the backup too!"

As soon as Astrid landed with Fireworm hot on her heels, Stoick turned

to her. He rolled his shoulders and waved her forward. She ran to him, and he steered her away from Hiccup for some privacy.

"Why did you bring him here?" he hissed. She stood straight, trying to ignore how strongly he was holding her shoulder, engulfing all of it with one hand.

"I can't make Snotlout get onto Fireworm; I'm lucky to know what I do about nadders, and I know nothing at all about nightmares. He's the one who knows, and we do owe him a debt. What he says about the dragons has to go! At least until the Red Death is dead."

And then maybe, Hiccup could come home. If what she'd seen now was any indication, and what he'd done for her this morning was any proof, he was slowly becoming ready to come home. Maybe Berk could have a Hiccup again, and she could finally start carving hammers for different reasons.

"And how do you believe this was your decision to make?" he hissed. "I know what went down this morning, Astrid, and we need to speak of that later; but I will let you know now that your decision here, today, has certainly made me reconsider a few things." Her blood ran cold as she looked up at him. "We do not have time for this now, but rest assured - we will talk about your â€| circumstances on Berk, later."

He left her reeling as he went back towards the arguing Hiccup and Snotlout, who was steadfast refusing to get anywhere close to the dragon. Bile rose to her throat, but she swallowed it, and then she rolled her shoulders and trudged forward herself, chin jutting out. Her treatorous mind still spun in the background - if he broke her contract, he may as well banish her, and just now that Hiccup -

Not the time. So many things could change today. Forever. She was not to know which ones. That was up to the gods.

"Snotlout's been clear, I think, boy," Spitelout was saying with ill-humour. "He doesn't condone your way, only the Viking way. He's needed here with the women and children anyway. He needs to guard the families of others."

"That is not what we agreed upon as a price!" Hiccup hissed, and Astrid heard a few gasps; Hiccup had not once brought the agreement up since it had been struck, even when Stoick had pushed its boundaries to the limit and made him fight for every single victory. Now Astrid knew why - but apparently Hiccup had finally reached the end of his rope, and was going to use Viking law if he had to.

"And what are you going to ask for as reparations," Spitelout asked slyly. "The girl behind you?" Astrid had to curb the urge to reach for her axe - when the weight of it rested in her hand, she realised she didn't hold her reflex strongly enough.

"I already belong to Hiccup!" she hissed, and almost clobbered Hiccup when he flinched, just a little bit. He was not denying her claim, and his reaction could be misconstrued! Idiot!

A slamming and jangling made people move aside for a rather irate Goethi, who whacked whoever she passed who didn't get out of her way fast enough. Finally, she gave Snotlout, Spitelout, Hiccup and Stoick

a good twack each. It was almost satisfying to see them cowing like young boys in front of the hip-high woman. She scratched a few signs in the beach's sand, and Gobber quickly hopped in to interpret.

"She says, you're all behaving like three month old yaks. And that there's more where that came from." He snickered. And got whalloped too. "Ow, crazy old bat!" Whack. "Oi! â€¦. She says that the dragon can have another rider if the stupid boy over there wants to be passed over, and that now is not the time to see who's curls are prettier. And that she would like to remind Stoick to milk â€¦ the windmill?" This whack made everyone wince. "OW! What! â€¦ Oh, to remind him of what you've spoken." Gobber looked towards Stoick in askance. The chief huffed in annoyance, waving his arm outwards violently.

"Fine! Be on your way with that dragon."

"There is no time to train someone else!" Hiccup replied, finally losing his patience. "If something happens to Hoark, on your head be it!"

Astrid stared at him, never having seen - not before he left, nor since he'd returned - Hiccup address his father in that manner. Sensing that this was not the time to argue, Astrid quickly moved towards the nadder as Hiccup hopped onto Toothless and began snapping his gear in place.

"Oi, I'll take 'er," Gobber suddenly said, moving forward towards the dragon.

"Gobber, you know you have another role," Hiccup said with tight patience, his self-control apparently partially restored, at least with the blacksmith.

"I will, then," Stoick said. Astrid saw Hiccup's throat bobble as he swallowed hard, and he quickly dismounted Toothless, who looked at his nervous rider in evident worry.

"Sir, you took a blow to the head two days ago," he said, and Astrid now was finally aware of how painfully raw and obvious the care in Hiccup's voice was as he spoke to his dad. He desperately wanted him to be safe, and in no way upset. And yet somehow managed to irritate him with every word he said - just as he had when he was young, thin, and looking up at the man hopefully from a much lower height. Astrid's nadder nudged her as her heart went out to him.

"You think that would be enough to stop the chief of Berk?" Stoick growled at him. Hiccup stiffened.

"Fine. But on one condition; you will wear the armour I made for you - even the head gear. Let's go back to the village. This is no place for you to train Fireworm."

Astrid was breathing hard as she watched them go, Gobber sighed and returned to his duty of helping all the non-fighters get settled. Just as she was about to turn to her nadder and follow, a tug on her hand made her look down.

The Goethi was there, looking stern.

"You can't, child," she said, and Astrid gasped and almost stumbled. The Goethi slapped her thigh with her staff to get her to focus again.

"What can't I?" she asked cautiously, wrapping her head around the fact that the old woman was speaking to her.

"You can't pay two men with the same coin," she replied, looking at her sharply. When Astrid only blinked at her, the Goethi's eyes narrowed, and she continued. "You can't marry them both."

Astrid blinked at her again. And then, she smiled.

"I may just manage," she replied, slipping her hand out of the old woman's grip and moving towards her nadder. Before she took off, she could have sworn there was a satisfied look on the healer's face.

=0=

Stoick watched the purple nightmare warily as she circled around, looking anxious and worried. The boy and his night fury were off to one side, ramaging through the equipment in the box, and Stoick tried not be annoyed by how casually he was doing it. The chief wasn't sure whether to be worried or gratified that he had finally managed to see him lose his temper, and let go of that chill detachment or patent calm that had always permeated his interactions with the young man. He'd manage to crack him, finally, to push him to the limit. But as Cattongue turned towards him with stiff impatient steps, rope in hand and evidently annoyed night fury at his heels, Stoick began to doubt how smart it had been.

Especially, as the Goethi had asked him to look, he had realised that it wasn't being disobeyed that had driven Cattongue mad, it was the chance that Hoark would be hurt as a result of Snotlout bowing out.

"You're larger than Snotlout, so the saddle needs adjustment," he said by way of explaining the rope, bending down and working furiously at the buckles, placing the leather seat further back and only changing from his hissing, angry tone when he was speaking to the obviously upset dragon.

"Don't worry, girl, I'm sure Snotlout will forgive you eventually, ok? You went off without him, so it was your bad, wasn't it?" Stoick had to admit that the dragon looked glum at being rejected, and gladly took Cattongue's comfort as he scratched her chin, and even accepted the night fury's rumbling, gentle head butt. Once Cattongue thought the saddle seemed to be in the right position, rope adding an additional few inches back, he stood and beckoned to Stoick with an attitude that took no nonsense at all. Stoick suddenly felt like he'd gone back ten years, and Val was looking at him about something or other he'd done wrong, and he was sheepishly walking towards her to be cuffed.

He banished the stupid thought, walking forward as warily as he had ever approached any dragon.

"That's not going to work," Cattongue said right away, and it was a testament to how his patience had truly finished that all the usual

politeness and respect was gone from his voice. Goethi's words hit him again as he realised he had been misconstruing genuine respect for manipulation, and that this young man was currently controlling his urge to send him to Hel's realm by a hair's breath.

"You have to trust a dragon in order for it to trust you. That is the main issue Snotlout had with her. He wouldn't trust her, so she got back to him by leaving him behind when the raid happened." He scratched at her chin again, giving a wry chuckle. "Nightmares are stubborn. Not as stubborn as night furies â€|" A high pitched noise of indignation left the black dragon, who whacked his rider with a tail. The man only snickered as he slapped the dragon's head away. "But their pride is by far the largest."

Cattongue walked up to Stoick with a firm step, his body language still screaming impatience with the human in a way it never did with the dragons. Taking Stoick's forearm, he tugged him forward, and the chief finally took umbrage.

"What do you propose I do, then?" he said, pulling his arm out of the smaller man's grip. Cattongue's body went even stiffer, and Stoick realised he'd crossed the last possible line.

"I propose you listen and you stop wasting my time and yours if you are serious about wanting Fireworm. She's already lost the first rider she's bonded with, she won't be well if she loses a second. And the Red Death is less than a day away! From one moment to the next we could hear the horns warning us that its on the horizon, and then it will be far too late! And where is Hofferson!"

Stoick blustered further. "You stay away from my daughter-in-law," he said with purpose. Cattongue whirled on him furiously. "What do you want with her now, haven't you damaged her enough!"

"I have not damaged her at all!" he yelled back, "And what I want with her is someone to inform the others that there are going to be some plans changed; because your place was supposed to be with the people operating the catapults, and now that will have to change if you're covering Hoark - and Spitelout will have to step in there, or Hacknee. And someone is going to have to replace them, and the easiest thing would be for Hofferson to replace her father at the front of the first push, because she knows what he was to be doing!"

Stoick looked at the boy, wide eyed at the sound logic of that strategy, and the fact that he had thought about it at all.

"We do not have time for this training session, frankly, Sir. Both you and I should be out there, taking care that every single detail is in place so it can all go without a hitch, and that no one gets hurt!" Cattongue walked back towards the nightmare, who tried to give the young man a comforting nose, and only received a curt petting. "Same goes for you, Fireworm. Will you be good for Stoick? He's the chief of this tribe, it's leader, and I need to know you will take care of him. The other people are counting on him, and the other dragons are counting on you to keep him safe. Will you do that now, girl?"

With some hesitation, the nightmare looked from the young man beside her to Stoick, and with a brief call and wiggle of her head as if to

ask for reassurance she then turned her yellow eyes to him and assessed him briefly before beginning to crawl forward.

As she got nearer, every movement he made caused the dragon to flinch, and she was constantly looking back towards Cattongue as if she were a young lass seeking approval from a parent to approach a stranger.

In that moment, Stoick realised two things; that the dragon was as terrified of him as he was of her, and that the creatures often behaved like a small child because they had the intelligence, and the innocence, of one.

"Don't move forward, Stoick," Cattongue instructed quietly, leaning casually against his night fury in a relaxed manner belied by the dragon's taunt body. Obviously, Stoick now could see that they would spring into action should anything happen, but Cattongue seemed content to let Stoick and the nightmare sort it out between them. "Just hold out your hand. Let her come on her own."

Stoick did as was asked of him with some trepidation. He squared his shoulders, holding his arm out and Fireworm walked up, eyes moving rapidly between his hand and his face, ready to draw back at a moment's notice. Finally, when she saw Stoick simply looking back, and unmoving for a lapse of time that seemed enough for her, she gently pushed her horned muzzle into Stoicks meaty hand.

The warm scales, dry and vibrating with the creature's breath, were something Stoick never thought he'd touch without it being the last thing he did before he died. Not like this, in the loving manner of a caress, as the creature he was touching looked up at him with innocent hope.

"You feel that?" Cattongue asked gently, coming from the side and somehow managing not to startle the moment he was feeling as it built inside him. Stoick spared him a glance, and the nightmare rumbled a purr, looking at him happily when she had his attention once more; again, just like a small child, seeking the approval of a favourite adult. "That is the bond you form with your dragon. She will care for you and protect you with everything she's got. You have to promise yourself to do the same; only then will you two really be a team." The night fury came up behind Cattongue and nudged him lovingly. "Like Toothless and I."

There was a pause as Stoick looked at the boy - young man - in front of him, and both Goethi and Gobber's words ran in his mind as he caught a glimpse of green eyes looking at him eagerly, with a calm that meant his temper had been settled.

Stoick swallowed and nodded, the nightmare cautiously coming closer to him and nuzzling his side, closing her eyes and allowing him to pet her while she was completely unguarded against him. Cattongue nodded, and Stoick could see his eyes smile through his helmet.

"Why are you doing this?" Stoick finally asked, at last coming around to ask the question that he and Astrid had had the courage to pose that very first day, and that had remained unanswered since. He had almost been relieved. He hadn't wanted to face the answer, not with all the ones floating through his head. He was too afraid of Cattongue confirming some of his suspicions. Or worse, of dispelling

them.

"You mean â€¦ for Berk?" Cattongue asked, his eyes suddenly covered by long, red-brown lashes as he looked down. "What kind of person would I be, if I could help but I didn't? Everyone on Berk is in danger, the whole of the tribe and the island are at stake, and I can't just stand by and do â€¦ nothing." He looked up at Stoick. "Even if Berk was my enemy, it would still make me sick if I decided not to help when I could. And Berk is â€¦ not my enemy. Not by a long shot." Cattongue seemed almost surprised by the last statement, said so quietly, almost as if to himself. It almost felt like he was telling himself something he'd believed for years was not real after all, and something echoed in Stoick's chest at the tone and the voice through the helmet; something familiar and painful. For a moment, he was reminded of his son, twelve years old and looking sadly back at him as he begged for later, and he had to swallow hard.

Before he could say anything, the fluttering of leathery wings was preceded by a gust of wind, and Astrid landed in the arena, passing through the main gate in a tight swoop. She hopped off the nadder right away, dodging the dragon's warbling snout as she walked towards them quickly.

"I've brought you food. We won't have time later." She gave them a loaf of bread each, and popped a small flask from which she poured some hot stew. She gave a tankard to each of them, then gave the dragons some fish.

"You need some too," Cattongue said after a swallow taken with the tankard under his mask revealing a strong chin, giving his own tankard back. She shook her head, taking a sip from the flask, and he drank again obediently.

"I've brought the chainmail, too," she said, turning to her dragon again and taking the tinkling metal links off her saddle. One she gave to Stoick, with an almost-shy glance, and she seemed relieved when he took it without preamble. She turned to Cattongue with another in her hand.

"This one's â€¦ for me?" she asked, this time definitely shy, and more than a little nervous. Cattongue tipped the tankard back, wiped his mouth, which Stoick unfortunately didn't get a glimpse of, and adjusted his helmet, nodding towards Astrid.

"I didn't have your measurements, Gobber helped with those. Try it on under your furs and let me know right away if it needs fixing. Fishlegs got his and it fits; his wife was lucky enough to fit in the first one I'd made for her brother and done too small. Try it on, there's barely any time. You're going to need to go to your father and tell him you're taking his place in the strategy, and have him go take over for Stoick with the catapults."

"What was my dad doing?" she asks matter of factly, quickly undoing her furs to reveal her tunic beneath and slipping the mail on top. She put her fur back onto the shining iron, shivering as it attracted the day's cold and made it cling to her chest, in the same way that the mail Stoick slipped on on top of all his clothing made him long to grab his fur lined coat.

"You don't know!" Cattongue said in dismay. "Don't you see him every

night?"

"Not since I joined the Haddock clan," she replied quietly, almost gently, and Cattongue's head fell back in frustration.

"I have to admit, I was counting on you knowing," he groaned, huffing as he righted himself. "The truth is, Fishlegs and I calculated that the Red Death can't be more than ten hours away at this point. By the early hours of the morning tomorrow, it will be here, and we have to be prepared. We don't have time to get confused and go around rehashing strategies we'd already worked on and â€|"

He sighed in worry and frustration, rubbing the back of his head almost violently. Astrid's hand rose to his arm, grabbing his bicep beneath the shoulder pad, her thumb unconsciously rubbing an arc into his tense muscle. Stoick felt oddly out of place witnessing that gesture, even though he knew he had every right to take Astrid aside again and disciplining her even more harshly. But the girl had been loyal and sad and lonely for five years, and when it came down to it, she wasn't doing anything to act on the feeling she was obviously beginning to harbour for this boy.

And the Goethi had said â€|

"Calm down," she said, a smile on her voice where her face only had one lip corner upturned. "We need your head to be screwed on right to come up with something stupid when we need it most."

"I've already done that," he laughed, nudging his head towards the night fury who was happily sitting at his feet, eyes half closed in a semi-alert nap.

"Then do something crazy," she replied. He straightened, something rippling up his body as if he'd been pinched. The dragon seemed to sense it, as he snapped alert immediately and rose to his feet, almost freakishly in tune with his rider who hopped on as if he'd known the dragon could read his mind.

"You're a genius. Please stay here with Stoick; I have an idea."

He was out of the arena like a shot, whistling through the air and throwing some of the last few Hooligans not used to it yet behind their shield with a cry to get down.

"What was that about?" Stoick finally asked her, making her start out of whatever reverie she had fallen into as she stared after him. She smiled back at him, somewhat sheepishly, but not with enough shame on her face to justify any real transgression committed. And he knew Astrid to be focused, and in no way a liar, not to him or to herself. Stoick came to the uncomfortable realisation that any show of emotion she was exhibiting towards that young man was unconscious and the poor girl had not yet realised that her feelings for him and her situation had changed.

It made him feel horribly guilty about the way he'd spoken to her this morning. She seemed reluctant to bring it up, however, and was cautiously approaching the nightmare, who didn't seem to mind being petted by her at all.

"Are you serious about taking her in?" Astrid asked him cautiously.

She was looking up at him through her lashes, and this time it was a step farther than sheepish. Being alone with him had probably made her slightly wary of his promised talk from this morning, and she was looking at him â€¦ almost with fear in her eyes.

Oh, Val. He had alienated one child, and was well on the way of alienating another. For the last five years Astrid had become so close to a daughter, and now she was looking at him like she was afraid of him.

"They change you," she went on slowly when he didn't speak up. The nadder Astrid had chosen came closer to her, warbling and nuzzling her hair. Astrid spared an arm to hug her around the bottom of her large, white jaw. Stoick put a hand on Fireworm's snout beside Astrid's smaller one. "You start recognising their calls and their behaviours, and realising what it means when they look at you in a certain way. And that each and every one of them that you â€¦ fought, before, was like a little human who didn't know any better."

It was like she'd entered his mind, and picked the thought he was trying to keep most hidden. He rolled his shoulders uncomfortably.

"It's not â€¦ a nice place to be, Stoick," she went on, resting her forehead on the nadder's jaw as she kept looking at him. "Are you sure, about her?" She gestured towards Fireworm. "Hi- â€¦" She stopped, and bit her lip hard enough to turn it white. "He said that she can't take losing another rider on the way to the beach."

Fireworm looked up at him with warm eyes, and almost like she could understand, she looked hopeful as her snout flared, his palm still flat on her scales.

Maybe, the poor dragon was asking for a 'later' after Snotlout had shunned her. And maybe, Stoick didn't have a later - not with that beast on the way. Maybe he only had a now. He thought of his smart, bright-eyed boy, and wondered how well he would have taken to dragons, to training them, to riding them.

Immediately, he knew that Hiccup would have been the first one on a dragon, screaming as he shot up into the sky and fell off and made disasters and got hurt.

"Yeah," he replied, bringing the nightmare's nuzzle towards him and making the dragon crow in delight as it closed its eyes and buried its face against his armpit. "I'm sure."

=0=

Hiccup couldn't help feeling exhausted as he flew around the island one last time, his right shoulder throbbing, making sure that everything was in order and the last of his plan was in place. The idea Astrid had given him was genius, but it posed its risks. Some of the people - Gobber in particular - had voiced his concern at the last minute changes and even grumbled at him putting himself in intentional danger. But it was his place to do it. He was the one who knew most about dragons, and he had to do this for Berk.

And then maybe, he could come home again.

The thought had been echoing in his mind more and more. Whereas just before Thug's wedding, merely weeks ago, he'd just been trying to plan for the Winter ahead, and hoping to be well received among the Meatheads, now it almost looked like he â€| was wanted, back here. It was a good feeling that was helping to balance the utter _crazy_ that the ticking clock of doom was doing to his head.

He stopped for a second as Toothless landed, making the nasal, high-pitched noise he usually did when he was protesting something or just generally grumbling. Hiccup rolled his stiff shoulder, lying down. His entire right arm was not in top shape, having not had time to put salve on it that day since the early morning. He dismounted and sat down.

"I know you're tired, buddy," Hiccup told him, allowing the dragon to put its large head on his lap and curl up around him. There was a lull in the day, something he needed to get a breather. The sun was climbing down towards the horizon, but the cloud bank covered what could have possibly been a beautiful afternoon light.

Maybe the last.

"Gah, don't think like that!" Toothless gave him a look. "Right, too much time on my hands to think stupid things. We should totally go to-

A horn sounded, then another. They echoed in his ears, and felt like they were passing through his skin and rattling his bones as the chill of what they meant froze all the muscles in his body. He was on his feet and racing to the closes cliff edge within seconds. Dear gods, it was _early_.

It was far off, still; a speck, but one that his spy glass told him had just the right shape to be their potential special guest, and gaining fast. Bile rose to his throat and he swallowed it, before new energy began to race through his body in anticipation of the fight.

"Ok bud, it's show time," he said seriously. Toothless was on his feet, waving Hiccup over with his head and vibrating with new energy. His eyes were slits of hatred as he looked at the distant shape. "Let's show this 'Red Death' who's going to bring the heat."

They shot up, even as a first wave of dragons, some in better conditions than others, were beginning to approach at great speed.

The fight was on.

=0=

1 Vikings had, perhaps, more self-consciousness in the male portion of their society than any of their contemporary cultures. Men were not only expected to be well groomed, wash _at least_ once a week, and to know how to read, write, and compose poetry. There were also certain â€| expectations in their relative â€| size. Now this is possibly a joke on the directors' part in canon (please see below); however it was no laughing matter to the culture's actual contemporaries, so much so that the belt Hiccup has in mind here is a

crotch enhancement.

Yes, a crotch enhancement. As in, sort of like a push-up bra, but for a man's package. Examples of belts like these can be found in Iceland, most famously in the penis museum (yes, that exists too).

On a sidenote, I find it very highly amusing that in nearly all of the preview scenes of the second movie we have seen to-date, Hiccup's trousers are tight enough to give him a crotch-bulge. It always makes me wonder how badly the designers and CGI artists were snickering while they were rendering those particular pixels. I, for one, find it a refreshing step forward; if Hiccup can have a metal leg, he can have evident sign of his gender. It's rather tiring to see so much blatant sexuality everywhere, and then hypocritically emasculating or defeminising characters by removing bodily evidence that simply denotes their gender. I really applaud Dreamworks for taking the risky road down the path of American censorship.

=0=

****Many, many things happening as this story draws to a close.****

17. Fimbulend

****The final confrontation. This is the chapter before the last. Serious (mythical) animal cruelty ahead.****

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1_

**Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir**

* * *

><p>Fimbulend

Fire began raining down from the sky mere instants after the second horn had gone off. The village of Berk had been mostly emptied, but the few stragglers that were left, packing belongings or guarding assigned outposts, or even looking for that last, stubborn sheep head, were thrown into a near-panic as a wave of dragons approached as if to raid.

The chaos was curbed almost immediately as the whistling heralding a night fury was heard, and immediately, the dragons charging in a raid-like attack began falling out of the sky as they were shot towards traps.

"Contain them!" Cattongue shouted as Thuggory rose beside him and nodded. Cami gave him a rakish smile and dove after them, Sting spitting gobs of acid at startled beasts that pushed them into awaiting traps and snares. "We have to make sure that they don't attract her here! They know they usually raid here, but she's following the scent trail! If we can neutralise them before the Red Death gets here, she'll pass over the village!"

"We'd better do that in a hurry!" Heather yelled, rising on Clover and then coming back down in a neat arc, "That thing is getting closer and closer!"

"Roger that! How many more dragons?!"

"Captured twenty, eleven more to go!" the big blond guy answered - Fishgills. Cami couldn't quite remember his name. His wife was more awesome anyway. And her brother.

"Right, we need to get them under control, now! Toothless!" A roar of assent, and then they were rising and coming back down, Thuggory blasting randomly and Hiccup picking them off as she and Fishgills made sure they stayed in their traps by bludgeoning them or herding them with acid.

"Fishlegs!" Oh, that was his name! "Are the braziers put out? Tell me they were put out when the Horn went off!" Hiccup asked as soon as the last dragon had been trapped.

"I don't know, they should have been!" the blond called. "I'll go make sure!"

"No!" Hiccup yelled, swooping beside the other man and dropping a moderately sized package into his hands. "Oh no! Snotlout was supposed to do it! Give those to Astrid and Stoick!" Cami smirked - he was calling her by name again; so much for keeping his distance. She hadn't yet figured out what happened this morning with Snotface though, so there was that little piece of information to squeeze out of him later. "Thuggory, go check the braziers, and if they're on, have Fanghorn blast them out! Then get into position at the peak! I'm going to reel the shark in!"

"It's too soon!" Fishlegs yelled. "The others won't be ready yet!"

Hiccup swore colourfully. She'd remind him of that one later, and Cami chuckled appreciatively at the shade of red he would go.

"I'll lead it once around the island! I hope to Thor that it follows me!"

"Stay alive!" Heather called after him as he dove away, and the whistle of their sudden burst of speed made everyone wince.

Thuggory dashed off, Heather screaming a similar warning after him to which he responded in kind before she too streaked off towards her designated place. Cami decided that she had no instructions to go to her post _just_ yet - not when there was that mysterious package to deliver. And maybe she could spy that silly one-legged blacksmith somewhere and wish him luck, too. That awesome man and his incredibly nifty all-purpose hand weren't ready to go down in battle yet - she prayed to Odin, at least. He still had to teach her a few of those card-tricks first.

"What are you doing?" Fishlegs yelled at her when he saw her following.

"Escort duty!" she yelled gamely. "That seems important." A nod towards the package. "And no offence but your forte seems strategy,

not offense or defence!"

"Technically, strategy can include both," he replied in annoyance as they circled, looking for the big lug Stoick. Finally, they spotted him running towards the Peak, a purple dragon at his heels as Astrid hovered cautiously overhead.

"Sir!" Fishlegs gasped as if he'd been the one running, quickly dropping in front of the chief and handing him the package. "Cattongue told me to give you and Astrid this. It seems important."

Astrid landed beside Cami, descending from her nadder and jogging over. Cami did the same under her own power, using the distracted chief and Hooligans to snoop and satisfy her own curiosity. It contained three notes, one of each of them with a diagram on the third paper, a small handful of chalky earth, and what looked like a bridle made of out that shiny light metal Hiccup loved so much for Fireworm.

"Oh no," Astrid said as soon as she'd read her note. "He's planning to do something utterly crazy!"

"But it just might work!" Stoick said, a devilish grin of bloodlust spreading under his beard. He turned to the nightmare. "What do you say, girl, do you think you can fly me slowly to the place I direct you to? We will not be flying till the battle's end, so please do not take off until I tell you to." The dragon nodded at him, and "€| was it looking at him adoringly? Gods of Asgard, did Hiccup get it from his _dad_, or had that guy done something to this dragon too?

Cami gave Stoick a once over. Huge, smelly, cranky and hairy. Nope, had to be option two. Hiccup had definitely taken all that made him awesome from his mum. Obviously.

Two roars were heard, and Cami swore.

"So the braziers weren't off," Fishlegs said, biting his lip. Stoick went stock still, and ran a hand down his face.

"We have to go, now!"

With more grace than she thought he owned, he got the equipment on the dragon and hopped onto her; she took off, cautiously, as if she was carrying a precious egg or a young. Thor, that dragon was almost infatuated with her preposterously large rider.

They followed, speed rising to breakneck level as Stoick quickly understood what to do and Astrid confidently lead the way on her sharp, fast nadder. Thuggory caught up with them, almost standing on his thunderdrum as they hurtled madly towards the valley.

"We have to hurry, he won't hold for long!" he yelled above the wind.

"Why?!" Astrid asked, her voice high. Cami eyed her with interest; that was not mere curiosity.

"That monster is swimming, and it's following Toothless well enough already as it is," he yelled, "But I have sharp eyes - that thing's

wings are almost healed. If it gets annoyed enough, it can probably take off, and then there will be no way we can contain it!"

"We'll just have to repeat performance!" Cami yelled, petting Sting who gave an approving roar.

"There won't be time! He's is holding it off until the beach is set!"

As soon as they arrived at the peak, Stoick looked around, searching for Gobber, who waved him over from what looked to be a make-shift smithy. Well then, good for him; Thor be with them all, and mostly with the smith.

"Cattongue set me up with this; says it works as well as any forge if this little guy here can help me heat the metal up." He nodded towards Gustav's baby nadder, who chirruped in response and puffed its chest out. Cami could have sworn the nadder was a female; huh, apparently not. The boy was also standing by, looking eager to help as he carried water-filled buckets and bustled around. "Are you going with his hairbrained idea? I've informed all the rest, and they seemed glad of it, but he's putting himself in unnecessary risk!"

"We can help if -"

A roar sounded, one that chilled everyone's blood with its familiarity and closeness. They rushed to the peak's cliff edge facing the ocean, the entrance of the water into the beach a strip that formed a natural port and cradle against the stagnant air sheltered by the sheer cliff drop. Cami whooped despite herself as she saw Hiccup and Toothless whizzing in and out of sight on and around the massive dragon's body.

Toothless was flying faster than she'd ever seen him. He veered at a second's notice, and the signature purple blasts came in shot after shot after shot. The Red Death roared again, and the smaller dragon barely got out of the way of its fire as the massive head rotated this way and that, sending the wall of flame she had seen before up and around the nimble black shape.

"GET MOVING!" Astrid suddenly yelled, whirling on everyone in way that brooked no argument. "Do all the dragons have their filters? _Put the filters on your dragon's ears, NOW!_" Damn, Cami would have extended an invitation to her as well if she didn't know that joining the Bog tribe was the last thing that Hiccup wanted her to do. "Drop those sacks in the sand, slowly! Don't let them open!"

Ropes began descending into the beach below, each one carrying a sack at the bottom that was deposited as gently as possible on the sand below and then the rope abandoned. Cami was glad for the lack of wind that avoided the delicate cargo from swinging. The sacks, all in differently stained in bright colours, and the brightest ones are the ones Cami is itching to see in action.

Hooligans, Bogs, Meatheads and UglyThugs were bustling to put a pair of filters on every single dragon's ears, and not a moment too soon.

"He can't hold on any longer, Toothless is slowing down! He's tiring

out!" Thuggory yelled, looking at Stoick frantically.

"I'm giving the signal. EVERYONE, IN POSITIONS!" Stoick yelled, and the bustle wound down to snap actions of weapons being unholstered and harnesses being tightened. With a nod, Stoick let his arm drop, and three horn blasts sounded from the hills above, where Hiccup had left them with one spy glass each to keep everything in view while keeping out of the way, as that job was assigned to the more aged fighters who couldn't participate directly.

The night fury immediately swerved and high tailed it towards the entrance of the beach, causing the tensions to rise to a near breaking point as the anticipation of battle mounted. The Red Death followed, maw open as it roared menacingly in an attempt to intimidate, eyes unhealed as its last remaining pair focussed intently on the black speck of Toothless's shape. Cami resisted the urge to swear and shudder at the malice she could feel radiating off this dragon.

"FIRST WAVE!" Hiccup yelled from atop Toothless as soon as the Red Death's tail cleared the entrance to the beach, and it was like a dam had been broken. A machine launched, a whistling noise almost akin to the night fury's whining dive cut the air, and in true form to the Vikings of Berk's years' experience in dragon combat, a massive muzzle slammed down onto the Red Death's jaw, clamping it shut. Dragons took off with roars and calls, and the Red Death threw its head this way and that as its prey was confused amongst a myriad of other, multiple coloured dragons.

It tried to lunge, tried to snap a few up into its mouth in an attempt to muscle the contraption off its face, but immediately the clanging started, big, concave domes being beaten savagely by Gronkle tails as the younger fighters supervised the situation and the strongest ones swerved them to keep the monstrous dragon always at the centre of the sound wave. The ear filters on their own dragons held as nadders rose like fire arrows, led by Astrid, and they began relentlessly shooting spikes into the delicate cliffside, already weakened earlier with blasts and carefully dug tunnels courtesy of their whispering deaths. Even now the rumble of tunnelling dragons began to vibrate the ground beneath their feet. This change of plans was awesome.

Hiccup began herding the monstrous thing as he whistled, and the youngest new recruits began to release packs of terrors that immediately tried to fly away. The tiny dragons had been tied to specific rocks in the cliff side with sturdy ropes, lynch pins Hiccup had called them, and as soon as their frantic flapping began to tug relentlessly, the nadder spikes in the rocks began to create fissures. Meanwhile, the nadders were aiming for specifically coloured sacks, releasing a noxious smelling gas that made the creature shrink away and quiver its nostrils in obvious discomfort.

The night fury began to dive in and out like an attacking swallow, and the Red Death found itself trapped in the basin of Troll Peak's almost closed beach. As it slammed first into one rock face, then another, a lot of the Hooligans began to understand why their machinery was all so far back and sometimes on platforms made with reinforced wood.

The whispering deaths made it out of the cliff sides facing the sea, leaving two holes behind them. As soon as Cami saw this, she whipped out the tiny horn Hiccup had given most of them and blew.

"INCOMING!" he yelled, and with a flip that served as run-up, Hiccup dove towards the Red Death, avoiding a head-butt skillfully and blasting it into the rock face on the right. Turning on himself in the air, wings spinning around Toothless' body as he cut the air whistling in order to sharp turn, Hiccup blew his own horn, and Thuggory got up high into the air with the last rope tied to a massive rock as the clanging on the massive domes redoubled, and Toothless blasted the opposite wall three times successively.

A snapping sound like a whip was heard, and the cracks and fissures on either side of the beach's entrance began to expand and join, snaking along the white chalk walls like black worms until the rumbling of growling, thundering rocks took everyone's breath away. The cliff face on the far side, where the beach led into the sea, gave out, and with a cacophony that almost drowned out the clanging, the entrance to the beach collapsed in on itself, leaving a pile of rubble large enough to have the beast trapped within what was now a cul-de-sac.

Thuggory had Fanghorn roar three times, and the Zipplebacks took off, led by Phlegma (and she had to say, Hiccup sure knew how to choose his lady friends) and Cami whooped as she joined the fray, a few more changewings rising with her. Instantly, the difference in the beast's attitude began to have an impact as it desperately tried to back out of the trap they had snapped on it, and found that it could only drive against the cliffs and collapse more rubble; but it could not get out.

The Zipplebacks began the rather more sneaky task instantly, while the changewings began distracting the beast with splashes of acid and disappearing acts, working with the nadder riders as more and more of the beast's scales began to be flaked off and nadders' poisoned spikes began to find purchase in the softened acid-attacked flesh. Unfortunately, its desperation lent it more strength, and with a gargantuan effort it manage to force its jaw open just enough, metal twisting and turning around its muzzle and forcing some of it into its flesh in an effort to kill them all. As soon as it began roaring and inhaled deeply, Hiccup blew his horn four times, and all the dragon riders shot out of the wind-less beach and into the gale above, just in time to avoid the stream of fire that always followed the Red Death's loss of patience.

This time it worked against it, as through the inferno, sharp-eyed nadders and their riders began to target the yellow stained sacks, hidden away into spots where they would not be incinerated, and the potent smell of sulfur began to choke the uncirculating air of the beach, enhanced by the heat produced in the Red Death's fire. Cami swerved to come between Astrid and Heather, who were both shooting relentlessly and ignoring the heat rising from the beach as anything and everything flammable, from plants to the sand itself, caught fire, and even though the flames died quickly as they ate all their oxygen, the heat was intense.

The Red Death was wheeling about frantically, trying to find a way out as its armoured head beat against the rocks and tried to escape.

Its efforts were in vain, and Hiccup wasn't quite through with it yet.

"Now, everyone, go for the eyes! SECOND WAVE!"

The nightmares went up, and suddenly there were fireworks as all the acid that they had poured began to smoulder and glow like angry ambers or charcoal left in the wind. Heather and Astrid dove, together with all the other nadder riders, and spikes began to fly relentlessly, some bouncing off the still armoured parts of its body, others finding their mark in softened scales and flesh. A horn went off from the hill, three short blasts, and all the riders began to put their masks on, as they had been trained, covering their mouths and noses. Cami joined in, letting Sting pour more and more acid as she and the other changewing riders rotated their positions from offence to defence. All the acid poured in was then spat on by the nightmares, whose viscous fire clung to the acid, but somehow didn't manage to ignite it.

Almost all the nightmares, led by Stoick, rose into the air carrying a rope each, and collectively lifted what looked like a larger version of all the machines around the battle field. This, however, looked like it packed the meanest punch of them all. Hiccup flew behind it, throwing himself off Toothless who stayed hovering nearby, and began to pull and push and prod and crank levers. Cami stopped in her job of distracting the massive dragon to rise above as a fresher changewing and rider dove in her pace, and could see Hiccup bodily hauling himself up to the seat that contained the final trigger. With bellows and gestures, Stoick kept the entire fleet of nightmares steady and aimed at the creature as if he had been doing it all his life. With a yelled warning, Hiccup finally launched when he was perfectly aligned.

The moment was breathless as the massive metal wire net unfurled, the weights at the bottom jangling. The Red Death didn't have time to move more than one step forward before the contraption made by Loki's inspiration descended upon it. Hooks the size of a small hall dove into anything solid they could find with their own weight and speed, and the massive dragon was pinned down under the weight of the rocks themselves as the pronged hooks sunk deep into the earth, and their shape prevented them from rising back up without digging out the cliffs themselves. Only the Red Death's head had remained uncovered, and no amount of struggling managed to liberate any more of its body from its squashed position against what was left of the ocean water and burnished, scorched sand.

"Disengage!" Hiccup ordered, throwing himself off the contraption and onto Toothless just as the nightmares let go of the rope, letting the poor beautiful weapon shatter onto the rocks below.

The Red Death screamed in anger and panic, and raised its large head to aim upwards, first trying to snap a bite at a few of the flitting dragons, and then taking a breath in that was deep enough to turn all of Berk into a crisp, dry land.

But when it exhaled, the fire it breathed was not the usual never-ending jet of flame. It barely passed its mouth before it disappeared, extinguished and dead. When Hiccup crowed in victory, Cami realised the crazy man had somehow accounted for this.

And then the Red Death started rumbling. The vibrations of its call began to shake the rocks, a few loose pebbles crumbling down to splash into the sea beyond the blocked entrance. Some of the dragons began to falter, but a shake of the head and a steady hand from their riders quickly brought them back to.

"That won't work, you horrid monster!" Hiccup roared, furious beyond anything Cami had ever seen him be. "Go for the eyes! Take them out now!" He drove Toothless into a dive, and right away began blasting in random directions so that the beast left itself horribly exposed every time it swerved to try to keep up with the agile night fury.

Within moments, Astrid had blinded its remaining right eye while Heather managed to out its left. Not to be outdone, Cami dragged Sting into it and had her pour as much acid into the fresh wounds as she could.

The Red Death screamed, banging its head about randomly now, and trying to snap at anything that passed it by, even if it was only a flying piece of debris that its own gyrations had sent shooting from the cliff face. Another horn went up, and the frantic clanging on the metal shapes resumed, this time at a frantic pace, and this time the Red Death moaned almost pitifully as it lurched and threw itself about in a disoriented way to try to get away from the noise.

"DISTRACT IT!" Hiccup yelled, and he and Toothless dove in, and out, and in again, wrapping sturdy, three-foot thick steel-reinforced rope around the dragon's limbs moving too quickly for it now to catch the movements of its enemy in its blinded state, though it flared its nostrils and came close to snapping them in half.

"Get away from him!" she heard Astrid scream, and she and her nadder dove in too, spikes becoming embedded even in the creature's unburnt hide as Hiccup gained enough time to finish tying all the ropes around the monster's various limbs.

Suddenly, the club-like tail swung, taking part of the net and hooks with it, and Cami dove with a screaming warning. Hiccup's agile dragon got out of the way; Astrid was not so lucky as she lost her grip on her saddle and fell.

She'd never seen Toothless fly so fast, even today, as he saved Astrid from the waiting jaws of the monstrous thing. As soon as Hiccup had her safely deposited on the far side of the peak, Cami spotting him flinging himself off his dragon to hug her, _of all the sappy things_, before he pushed her towards Stoick who landed beside them, Hiccup was up again like a streaking shot from Hel's own crossbow.

And she knew that body language. Hiccup was done playing cautious. He was about to get mean.

"Get ready! Cover me! HELGA! GO NOW!"

Cami didn't know all the stages of the plan, but she spotted a young girl aboard a whispering death duck behind its spikes as the dragon descended into the closed off beach as far from the Red Death as they could before the dragon dove into the rock-face with gusto.

The Red Death turned at the noise, but Toothless and the nightmares began blasting it relentlessly making it turn its body this way in that as far as the still steadfast parts of the net allowed in literal blind panic, snapping at them randomly and dangerously, and still trying to ignite the flames that only somehow managed to reach barely past its snout. They were, however, still hot enough to fry anything they hit alive, as an unfortunate terror discovered.

The whispering death suddenly shot out of its own entry hole back within the beach's enclosure, and Hiccup began to yell horsely.

"Get clear! Get out, now!" They all shot upwards obediently, and he gave five, short horn blasts. A massive flat disk made out of reeds was wheeled towards the edge of the peak overlooking the beach, almost large enough to cover the entire basin of the beach below, and it was wedged into a metal contraption with weighted circumference that allowed the men to lower it slowly by cranking a lever.

Hiccup called out, and three nadder riders directed their dragons to aim at a number of ropes connected to the ones tied around the beast. As soon as they were cut, the tension on the reinforced three-foot cable increased, and Cami realised that the other end of the rope disappeared downwards into whispering death holes made in the ground, and they seemed to be weighted, as none of them budged as the angry dragon began pulling and shrieking.

Half-way through, the lever dropping the reed disk jammed.

Hiccup swore spectacularly, landing beside the men and trying to lend a hand uselessly. Cami and Thuggory also landed, and Stoick ran up.

"What is it?" he demanded urgently, Astrid close on his heels with blood still pouring sluggishly down her face from a wound on her forehead.

"It's not jammed, the metal's melted on the inside," Hiccup said through gritted teeth, and Cami immediately realised how hot the temperature around them was, and not because of all the exertions and the battle rush. "Get out, all of you! I'll get under the reed and blast the rope holding the whole cranking machine up. That will close it over the beach anyway."

"No, you can't!" Astrid yelled, stepping forward. "You'll get trapped in there!"

"No, I won't," he said firmly.

"I will do it," she said fiercely. Hiccup grabbed the hands that were trying to grasp his front and pressed them back gently, pushing her towards Stoick who grabbed her instantly.

"You can't! Only Toothless and I are agile and experienced enough to get out of there on time, and only I know where that rope is, because I did it myself!" He turned to Thuggory. "The timing has to be perfect, you hear me? I want you to take Fanghorn to that rock face and blast where Helga tells you to. As soon as I hear that I'll shoot from the inside and get my ass and Toothless out of there. You two have to move as soon as it's done. Now go!"

"No, you're an idiot, you're going to get yourself killed!" Astrid yelled, fighting against Stoick's grip with everything she had even as he dragged her away. "Don't you understand that Berk needs you back!"

Cami raised a brow at the normally cut and composed girl as actual tears began to surface in her eyes while she struggled to get out of the vice grip she was being held in. It was no use, Stoick pulled her decidedly away. Hiccup's hand rose for a split second, palm glancing her cheek softly, and Cami felt like a thief in the night all of a sudden, witnessing an intensely private act that cracked something in her chest. It certainly cracked something in the Hooligan girl's.

"I'll BE back," he assured her, and hopped onto Toothless, taking off before more words could be said. Astrid roared angrily, but still couldn't struggle out of Stoick's grip as they all moved away as quickly as possible. Thuggory and Fanghorn took off with the girl and the whispering death, and every person who did not have a dragon was picked off the ground by those who did. All of Berk's fighting population, together with all the Bogs and Meatheads and Uglythugs who had come to lend a hand, cleared out. They rose off the ground, riding high enough for the cloud banks to be at their backs in cold biting curtains of moisture on Heather's frantic orders; but everyone's eyes were still glued below.

Toothless disappeared into the beach, still mostly visible behind the half-lowered reed. The beast was a lot more alert with the clanging noises gone and attacked right away, forcing the night fury and its rider to manoeuvre in the tight space, twisting and turning into knots and bends that for anyone else would be impossible. Cami bit her lip as they narrowly avoided being bitten in half.

The roar came from Fanghorn, followed by the noise of crumpling rock, and then the strange, whistling noise of air being pulled into a tight space. Fumes she had not realised were present moved in the sudden air-rush within the beach as Hiccup took out the dagger on his wrist and flung it at something.

The lid began to fall, and the sleek black shape shot out at the last second, then turned, and fired a single, almost anti-climactic shot into the closing space of the beach.

The moment the reed lid had settled the metal on its outer circumference fastened deeply into the ground and sealed the entirety of Troll Peak beach, and the centre of the reed mat was sucked inwards as if pulled by an invisible rope. Then with a thunderous roar, a terrible whoosh of air was heard and the beach exploded from within as the Red Death roared in the way it usually did when it shot flames. The rocks around the area where Helga's whispering death had tunneled, and that Thuggory had blasted, collapsed in on itself as a massive fireball first raised and then consumed the reed mat.

All the riders began to struggle as all their dragons banked in the sudden rush of hot air rising towards them, but everyone's eyes, including the dragons', were glued to the Red Death, being cooked in its own fire as it's frantic movements brought the cliffside down on it, all the ropes Hiccup had tied to its limbs were tugging at sharp metal anchors that had been placed inside the rock of the cliff

during the preparations, sharp anchors coming free, bring the rocks down, and embedding themselves in whatever they found with the violence of rebound. The Red Death perished screaming, covered in flames and sharp metal wounds, only to be swallowed by the falling rocks around it that melted and engulfed it in an embrace of lava and molten earth.

But much more terrifyingly, much lower than all of their dragons in altitude, the night fury and his rider struggled to right themselves as they were buffeted by the violent winds of the explosion. They swerved and resisted for as long as they could, but then they bungled a right turn. Toothless was finally flung out of control and careening outwards towards the ocean when a much tinier speck shot off the dragon's back, also hurtling towards the water.

"NO!" Astrid screamed. "HICCUP!"

"WHAT?" was Stoick's answering roar. But Astrid never replied as his suddenly slackened grip let her finally escape him, and she threw herself off the nightmare.

"Stormfly!" she called, and her nadder was there, catching her and shooting off after the two at speed Cami had only seen from Toothless.

"We have to get to land!" Heather yelled suddenly, directing her nadder towards the closest safe landing spot away from the roiling rubble and lava.

The light was waning, sunset suddenly fully upon them as the battle drew to a close that left most of them breathless and boneless with fatigue and fear. Cami saw two other dragons shoot off after the nadder - Stoick on his nightmare, and Fishlegs on that gronkle, and she had Sting stand by, just in case.

She was the first to spot Astrid coming back, Hiccup bundled in her arms, red water dripping after her like she had been soaked in wine, visible even in the waning light. A glimpse at her face told Cami everything she needed to know.

"Toothless needs to be brought out of the water," Astrid almost sobbed. "Stoick and Fishlegs are trying, but â€¦"

"Leave that to me. Now you, _go_! To the healer, go, go!"

Astrid nodded, some light between madness and determination re-appearing in her eyes as she urged her dragon forward, her voice still audible moments later as she shot away, urging and begging her very willing dragon to go as fast as she could.

Cami turned around and whistled to Thuggory, "Hey, we need to get Toothless out of the water!" He rose, accompanied uncalled for, but not unwelcome, by the twins on their zippleback, and then of their own accord, by every single other dragon and rider.

Cami turned Sting around and went to save a friend, praying to Loki that he wouldn't take her favourite mad boy away so soon, and trying to banish the copious amount of blood she saw trickling down from the nadder's seat.

=0=

1 The title means; Long End, or Long Awaited Ending

=0=

****Ah, I am so, so cruel to Stoickâ€| poor dear. His punishment, of sort, for driving his son away here is finding out like this; it's something I find almost too cruel. I'm sure most of you understand.****

****Ok, a note I did not want to make, but I find myself forced to:****

****I have not read Hitchups, and I do not plan to. It is not, not, **_**not**_** a comment on my opinion of the author and her work â€" Arctic is someone I met on tumblr and she's a lovely lady (hey there, archnemesis!), and her one-shots for Hiccup/Astrid are well written and some of my favourite. However, from what I saw of the story line in her art on devArt, and from the page on TV Tropes, it simply does not seem like the kind of story I would like. Again, this is just a personal preference, and I totally think that Arctic Repartee is awesome. I only leave this note because I've recently received a review saying that I 'borrowed' from Hitchups â€" and not in a negative way. But it annoyed me, as I always make extra **_**sure**_** to reference stories that have influenced my fandom headcanon in my footnotes, and since I have not read Hitchups, it would be impossible to be influenced by it; and had I been, I would please like to assure everyone that I would have marked what the influence was, and given it proper credit in the footnote, as I have done with several other stories. I have also been receiving a lot of PMs telling me that I should read it, and I would really like it if it could stop and if my readers could respect my choices. Please? Thank you.****

****On another note, and talking about TV tropes, I'd really, really like it if one of you did me a favour. I would like to add reens' 'The Choice' and Foxy's 'Chasing Thunderstorms' series to the Recommendation page of TV Tropes, but that website doesn't like me at all. I've opened about four different accounts on different emails, and I never manage to successfully edit a page. I would be very grateful if they could be added, as both authors deserve the plug, and their stories are so truly enjoyable.****

****The last chapter will be up next Thursday 27****th**** March. The three epilogues will be up on the 28****th****, 29****th**** and 30****th****. I thank you all for all the lovely, insightful reviews and a special tip of the cap to all my sharp, sharp readers, who kept me on my toes and excited when they got all my hints and clues.****

18. Vagga

****The lull after the storm. Some mentions of nudity and bodily functions.****

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1_

**Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir**

* * *

><p>Vagga; Interlude

Astrid started awake, her shoulder protesting wildly at the position she'd fallen into through her exhausted state. Her neck throbbed as she turned it, but she stubbornly ignored it, pushing off the mattress to straighten the covers and then smooth a hand down his unresponsive face.

He hadn't moved an inch, not since she'd fished him out of the water, barely conscious and delirious with pain. That was three weeks ago.

She pushed off the bed, all of her body stiff and aching as she straightened and stretched. The Goethi would be here soon, with fresh salves and ointments, and with the plants to boil and put him in his painless sleep.

"Good morning, Toothless," she whispered to the dragon, who had curled up around his bed and refused to move. The first time the dragon had needed to relieve himself, he'd been so upset that he had to leave his rider's side that he hadn't eaten since. It was only because Astrid had allowed the dragon to use reeds she then removed that he even drank anything.

"Good morning to you, too," she whispered, turning to the calm freckled face on the pillow. With cautious fingers that hadn't quite stopped being hopeful yet, she ran through his hair, watching as his brows twitched and his closed lips moved. He had done this for the last two days, respond when she touched him, and it gave her so much hope she thought she'd burst with it, as Toothless sniffed at him encouragingly.

Then sneezed.

"I know, it smells funny" she said with a smile, and began pulling the covers back as she took the pot of boiling water off the fire. It would be best to get this task done before the healer arrived; she wasn't sure how much Hiccup would appreciate knowing that the village healer had seen him in the buff any more than necessary. In fact

Astrid sighed, the irony not lost on her. The first time she would see her promised unclothed, it should have been in much different circumstances. As she rolled her sleeves and put some ice into the boiling water to even the temperature, stripping away the soiled skins and pulling up his short tunic, a part of her still smiled at how red he would become, when he found out that she sponged him clean every day, if his father was correct.

The truth was, Astrid had seen her fair share of naked men. Her brothers had never been ones to have compunction on washday because their little sister was around, and as they grew older, it had even been her duty to help her mother fill the baths and wash the clothing before the eldest sons of the family had started taking wives. In fact, Astrid was about as desensitised to naked men as she was to

holding axes, and splitting heads like melons with them. Her dad often sat down and played Fox Games with one of her brothers while they both had everything out to dry at the fire, crowing at the board when he won as if he were fully clothed, instead of balls to the wind.

She washed his hands next, and his arms, lifting him to take the tunic off - and blessing the opening at the front - to bathe his chest and back, removing the accumulated sweat of the night; nothing near what he'd suffered through his last fever. The gladness she still felt, even at a week's distance of that fever breaking before it could take him away from them, made her chest shake. Every time his skin, warm by not burning, rested against her hands and wrists, and every time his calm, even breaths brushed her cheeks as she washed his back, it was a blessing from Frigga.

She put him down gently, cradling his head like an infant as it lolled then settled on the pillow. She took a moment to look down at him, taking in his healing bruises and scars. The Goethi had been most worried about his ribs and lungs, but they had fared well, with only some severe bruising, his arms and hands and fingers had also been protected by his armour. His legs had fared similarly, though his right knee had been swollen and angry through the first week as the protective pad had caved in on it.

His left foot, howeverâ€¦

He must have landed on it, or been hit by some of that flying debris, because it had been mangled beyond recognition. The Goethi had taken one look at it before she began screaming orders. The village had been too startled to dare disobey or gainsay her, and his foot had been lost and throw into the fire before Astrid could realise that she was sobbing.

She cupped the stump as gently as she could, swathed as it was in bandages and poultice. When the Goethi came, she would help clean it as she did every day; a part of her rejoicing to see it heal well, the other part mourning his loss and the shock it would bring him once he was awake. Gobber had taken the measurements, and in a few more days the new foot would be fitted in place of the old one, just as soon as the sutures stopped leaking blood.

Astrid sighed, caressing his hair as she gently wiped him down, wondering whether she should wash it, when he murmured something he had repeated for the past three days. Immediately, her stomach plummeted, and she looked away from him with a blush, covering him up. It was in moments like this that she felt shame for seeing him, instead of joy in his recovery and warmth at his closeness, never mind that it was her duty as the only woman in his household, and his promised. He didn't want her to see him, and that made all the difference.

"Sepha?" Astrid turned around, startled, to see Stoick standing at the entrance of his own chambers. When she had moved in, the platform that had served as Hiccup's bed space had been closed off with light wood and reed to give her some privacy, and Stoick himself had then walled off the portion directly underneath to add the support, lest the platform collapse under the added weight, and taken it as his own bedchamber. It had made carrying Hiccup's bed down problematic. In the end, the frame was dismantled and reassembled next to the fire in

the hall's main room.

Astrid sighed, looking away from Stoick as well as she brushed stray hairs from his eyes. "The most beautiful woman in Midgard," she replied with a smile that was probably more than a little odd. Her insides always twisted when she remembered that. She had begun harbouring the horribly presumptuous hope that the girl from his childhood Cami had mentioned had been her, until he'd begun murmuring this name a few days ago. "I think he may have loved and lost her."

"Ah, Hiccup," Stoick said with open compassion as he walked over to the bed, shadowing his son as he blocked the firelight. Then he looked at Astrid, and his face changed to one of dismay.

"He told you this?"

"Not in so many words," she went on, still caressing his hair, her chest twinging again when he sighed and murmured unintelligibly. "We were speaking, the day before Dogsbreath came in. He said I remind him of her."

"Oh, Astridâ€¦" She shook her head vehemently.

"Don't, Stoick," she said, voice always hushed around his bed even when she wanted to raise it above her choked whisper to mask the tone. "Before all this happened, I left it all up to him. We were to speak again, before Snotlout and â€¦ we didn't have the time. But the last we spoke, I knew who I was talking to, and I told him I would let him choose. If he decides that he doesn't want to stay, or doesn't want â€¦" she stopped. She couldn't continue that sentence. "I think he's given Berk enough, it's time we give something back. The choice is his to make."

He gave a heavy sigh, resting his larger hand on his son's head, causing Astrid to withdraw her own. "You're wise beyond your years. Me â€¦ he was right there, and I never saw him. Even when I try to do right by him, all I can do is hurt him," he said in a voice so sad that it broke her heart.

"I don't think he sees it that way," she said kindly and honestly, remembering the raw care in his voice every time Hiccup spoke to Stoick through Cattongue. Hiccup very obviously still loved his father. These two men just needed to learn to tell each other just how big a place they had in each other's hearts. Maybe then, they could begin to mend their relationship, and knit together like broken bone.

What would become of her and him â€¦ she had told Stoick the truth. She turned to look at Hiccup again, now resting more peacefully, breath deep and head lying quietly on the pillow. Whatever happened was up to him.

=0=

Light hurt so. Very. Badly_. It was evil, truly evil, and Hel had something going, to have her realm in darkness. He bet she just had a massive hangover and just didn't want to be disturbed. That would explain her cranky, 'damnation on the souls' nonsense too. Someone just needed to give her some watered honey.

Hiccup groaned, trying to remember how on earth he'd ended up with the mother of all hangovers. Had he been out drinking with Thuggory again? He'd sworn he never would again, after the last time when Thug'd become engaged - then again, hadn't he got married recently? That was probably it, they had gone and gotten so spectacularly plastered poor Heather was probably still a virgin, and Brawlknife was going to kill them all!

He shifted, and suddenly, three quarters of his body was on fire. His knee hurt like the jotun had taken an ice pick to it, his shoulders and back and chest felt like every breath he took - which began coming in shorter pants - was stabbing him repeatedly from the inside out.

He opened his eyes against his own advisement, and found that the light was not, in fact, sunlight, but a merry blaze keeping the place toasty warm a few feet away from the bed. His head cleared, if only slightly, and he became aware of the huffs of warm air blasting against his arm, which he'd recognise anywhere.

"Hey, Toothless," he said, instantly receiving enthusiastic thrilling noises from deep in his friend's throat and the hand he'd raised to pet him on the head was laved with sticky, wet dragon saliva. "Och, Toothless!"

Somehow, he managed to find the strength to raise his head, and the sight of his wet hand suddenly made him realise exactly why he had awoken.

Gods, he needed to go, real bad.

He tried to sit up, with the result that he had to try really badly not to faint. Toothless moaned and murmured in obvious distress next to him, and through the pain Hiccup remembered with slow, sluggish thoughts what seemed to be flashes of images - tumbling rocks and trees and water.

"Gods, did I fall off you like a complete amateur?" he asked. That's it, he was never going to drink with Thuggory again, only bad things happened. "Are you hurt too, bud?" Worry rose in his chest like a physical thing, and with some struggles - and help from the same dragon he was trying to take care of - he managed to get up, somehow. Panting heavily and hurting all over, Hiccup first looked at Toothless before taking stock of himself. All told, Hiccup thought in relief, the dragon didn't look much worse for wear. There were a few more missing scales than usual, exposing the bluish black skin beneath, but nothing the dragon couldn't shrug off.

He raised a brow when he looked at himself. One couldn't say the same for the human, he thought sarcastically, as he took stock of the bandages around his chest - which were part of what was constricting his breathing - and what he could see of various cuts and multi-coloured bruises peeking around the white medical bands and open front of his eastern tunic. He pushed his elbows forward, trying to sit up straighter, and his abdominal muscles contracted and twitched in protest, as if they too wanted to join the pity party, even though he could see nothing wrong with them. It almost felt as if he'd been given a beating. Gods, he hadn't been this bad since the Picts and Sepha...

"Asgard, what did happen," he asked, taking on elbow off the bed in order to cradle his head even if he tottered. He tried to pull himself backwards, and managed with moderate success, especially when Toothless lent him a nose he could push against. He gave a sigh of relief when his back found the headboard and he flopped bonelessly against it, panting like he'd run from the hairy red moving bushes of men that were the Scot tribel. He groaned at himself as his bladder gave another, more insistent twinge, so with a resigned sigh, he ignored the slight nausea (never again, Thuggory, never again), pushed the covers off and swung his legs over the bed, aiming for the door.

Legs, leg and wooden metal thing, whatever.

He stopped, his brain finally catching up to what his eyes had seen. His whole body went rigid, the pain taking a sudden backseat as his skin broke into a cold sweat and an unnatural chill took hold of his chest. The feeling of slight sickness became burgeoning nausea, and he suddenly lurched forward and put his face into a bucket containing a few fingers of water which he spotted at the last minute. The unexpected strength of the lurch and heave flung him clean off the bed, and he groaned while he vomited, smacking the floor with his right side and only then realising that he was naked apart from the tunic and bandages.

Toothless gave a high pitched scream that he only uttered when he was in great distress, and that probably would have hurt if his ears weren't already ringing almost deafeningly. There was a bang, a gasp and some called words in a tone of dismay that he did not understand, and then there were hands under his armpits and someone holding his almost bobbing head as he heaved, comforting palm on his forehead.

He didn't know for how long he was ill, but it felt like an eternity. Once his stomach had stopped trying to eject bile and even the air it contained, not little in thanks to the warm hand that was rubbing his belly, he started trying to stand, which he managed on wobbly, achy knees between Toothless's snout and the solid, strong hands and arm around his back. He turned to say thanks, and stopped short.

Lovely blue eyes, flaxen hair, slightly rounder face, delicate nose. Worried, very, very, worried expression.

Astrid. That was Astrid, his beautifulâ€|

Of course it hit him at that moment. Of course it would. Dragon Island, the massive dragon, Berk. Returning here. The final push of that creature and then â€|

Falling, tumbling, drowning, and finally Astrid and Astrid's arms, and sky and sea and pain.

If his stomach weren't empty, it would have emptied itself again. No that it didn't try.

"Easy, shhh," she said in a quiet voice, pushing him back towards the bed. He almost collapsed with a cry of pain when he tried to put weight on his left foot. Again, her strong hands and his loyal dragon caught him, but he suddenly realised that what he had seen earlier

was real, that his foot was gone and there was a metal thing attached instead, and it hurt like Odin's dogs were still ripping it off, which granted, was an occupational hazard, but dear Odin whyâ€¦

And then he realised also that he was mostly naked, covered in ill and tottering helplessly like a child in front of the woman who's opinion counted most in the world. Blood rushed to his face, and even more followed when his bladder gave another twinge - this time one where the next would mean soiling himself.

"No," he said, and Asgard, it came out as an almost pitiful moan. No, no, not in front of Astridâ€¦ "I need to â€¦"

"What is it? Tell me, Hiccup," she urged gently, so gently, rubbing a cheek against his shoulder as both her hands were occupied. It was soothing, but it was almost as if she were trying to calm a distressed child, not an adult man - an adult man who had looked at her and longed for her for what felt like all his life. But now he was reduced to this, and oh, all the gods, he was going to have to speak, or he was going to â€¦ but howâ€¦

"I have to â€¦ pass â€¦ water," he replied awkwardly, using the only euphemism he could think of that didn't sound vaguely vulgar or suggestive, and ending up sounding like a demented old man instead.

"It's alright, I'll help. Go for the bucket, it has to be cleaned anyway," she said, still in that gentle tone reserved for upset children. Gods, how humiliating, how humiliating, why Astrid? Why not anyone but Astrid?

"No," this time it came out as a long moan, because his bladder was hurting almost worse than the throbbing wound that was the rest of his body. "No helping!" he tried for an order, but it came out as a plea. "I'm not dressed, it's not right!"

"I'll just hold you up," she said, and there was also a note of pleading in her voice. She turned her face away, resting her cheekbone against his shoulder as her flushed cheek fit perfectly into the natural cradle of his upper chest. She fit against him like a missing piece of himself. In his pained and confused state, his heart almost broke. Beautiful Astrid, fitting against him like that, allowing him some dignity, even as he vomited all over himself, naked and shamefully weak.

It was one of the most embarrassing moments of his life when he handled himself and aimed for the bucket, the tinkling sounding loud and obscene in the quiet room as he was keenly aware of her sweet breath against his arm the whole time.

He moved back on suddenly stiff muscles as soon as he was done, and was sure that he had not left any undue necessities for her to clean up, knees hitting the bed too quickly for the long distance he'd felt he'd travelled when he got off it. He went down like a rock, and Toothless was halfway up the bed and holding him up instantly, while Astrid steadied him against the dragon and then dashed to bring a rag and basin, with which she began cleaning his vomit.

He tried to protest, batting her hand away, feeling shockingly weak for having just woken up. She shushed him quietly, and he could have

sworn he felt the ghost of lips on his forehead. To his horror, tears sprung to his eyes at her tender treatment, because how was she supposed to look at him as a man, to see someone who wanted her so deeply when he couldn't even stand unaided?

But he was already closing his eyes, already feeling his limbs grow heavier even as he tried to bat her hands away, while she persisted in cleaning his chest, his tunic, his - gods, she was cleaning his crotch with the warm, wet rag. He wished he could have yelped and twisted away as he wanted to do, but his body was too heavy, and all he could do was groan and turn his head away, blushing uselessly.

"Ok, Toothless, give me a hand," he heard her say, and he was lowered back onto the bed, her hands under his knees and under his armpits, his metal foot unsnagged carefully and lovingly as covers were pulled over him. He opened his eyes, blinking slowly as he tried to see between the gaps of darkness when the weights at the end of his eyelids pulled them down again, but all he could glimpse was her hair, untied and shining in the firelight, a muted red-gold hue that was as beautiful as any sunset.

"Astrid," he whispered, and fingers ran through his hair and face.

"Yes," she replied in a breathy sigh. "Rest, Hiccup. I will be here."

It was her this time, it was really her. He wasn't going to wake up to find Sepha tending to him and a pit of disappointment that would swallow him whole. She was here, his Astrid, caring for him.

Then he wished she wasn't, when he remembered her hand on him, and her having seen his battered, pitifully weak naked body. She had seen now. She would know that he was nothing like the other, stronger and better men of the tribe.

Her fingers carded through his hair, touch light and tender.

"Astrid," he said again, before his mind gave out again, and his consciousness winked into sleep.

=0=

Stoick sat in the meeting, his mind full of a wasps' nest of buzzing and nothing more. He was exhausted and frazzled with worry, and there was not a single thought he could have on a practical thing going on in the meeting without it turning to his boy, lying on that bed, a leg less; because of him, and because of Berk.

"That really isn't the issue here," Thuggory was growling. "The issue is that you and your son broke the agreement. He was supposed to get on that bloody dragon and put out the fires at the mouth of the port. Because of him, Hiccup had to go out there and bait that thing while I put out the fires!"

Stoick had to force himself to listen. The Meathead heir had taken his son's loss rather badly, and had decided to take umbrage at Snotlout's role in it.

"He had to adjust half his strategy to accommodate this idiot's tantrum," Cami said. Stoick sighed; The Meathead heir wasn't, in fact, the only one. His son had apparently accumulated more allies than his great grandfather Hamish in the past five years. If any doubts still lingered in his mind on his son's worthiness to follow after him, they were swiped clean off.

If he wanted to stay. If he wanted to follow after him. If he wanted to speak with Stoick at all.

"...blame a faulty strategy on my boy!"

"The 'faulty strategy' that got you a Victory that will go down in the legends! How dare you speak of your own in this way! What kind of Vikings can't follow orders given and do what he's told!"

"Just following your precious _Hiccup's_ example! He couldn't follow one to save his life! And why do you jump to his defence in this way, he is not even a Meathead!"

"He is my best friend! And he would have been better off born in my tribe, where he would have been respected!"

"Are you insulting our tribe's hospitality after you have mooched off us right before the Winter?"

"I was here to help save your arses from something you had started yourself!" Red in the face, Thuggory unholstered his axe. "That's more than enough words from you!"

"Enough!" Stoick finally roared, quieting the room. He stood up, his patience waning at being forced to sit through this farce instead of being by his son's bed. Astrid herself had been spared the ordeal; he honestly thought they wouldn't have managed to get her away from his bedside even if they chained her and used dragons to pull. He frowned at Thuggory.

"Put that axe down, boy," he said. "We are allied clans, and we do not arm ourselves against each other in our council rooms. That is an act of war, and I'll forgive it only this time, because you are young and angry." He gave the boy an unblinking glare, which was returned unflinchingly. "Now put it down."

Thuggory seemed about to send him to the jotun before his wife gently managed to pry his axe away from him. He huffed, still obviously fuming, but allowed her, and nodded to Stoick. The chief then turned to Spitelout.

"Apologise, now," he ordered. Spitelout went crimson.

"What!"

"You insulted my son. You insinuated that the heir and future chief of a brother tribe was not a welcome guest, and belittled the aid he and his friends, the fellow heirs of all our allied clans, gave us in one of Berk's greatest battles. That is not acceptable, Spitelout, and I will not allow it. Apologise."

With a rebellious, crimson face, jaw jutting out that his son had

fully inherited, Spitelout turned to Thuggory and spat an apology between his teeth, which Thuggory and the Bog heir accepted with tight nods.

"Thuggory," he continued, addressing the boy. "Concerning my son's arrangements with the village being breached â€¦ I am glad he has made such a friend as you, ready to go this far to help him." Another curt nod. "But I think, perhaps, it would be best to wait for him to recover, and to speak of his own price," he concluded. Stoick just hoped his son was still the boy who had left, still the beloved child of his heart who cared so much that he drove himself to committing disasters because he wanted to help so badly, so that he wouldn't ask for something that would harm their tribe.

But of course, he knew it was so; his son, estranged and thinking that Berk was his enemy of all things, had come to Berk to help with every intention of leaving it as the stranger he had come, and took nothing as a reward but to teach and help and give them more. Stoick felt another wave of shame wash over him; there was his son, giving him another later, and there was he, the father, spitting him in the face for it.

"Technically, Stoick," Gobber spoke up, stroking his long mustache seriously, "If you look carefully at this situation, you'll find that there was no debt, actually?"

"What?" he asked, and Thuggory started going crimson again but stood silently.

"Debts are owed to outsiders," Gobber said, and Stoick's brain lit like a forest fire. "And your son isn't one. Therefore, there was never any debt in the first place." He gave a pleased smile, and Thuggory looked at him furiously but did not rejoinder. "I 'ad some time to think about it, because I'd begun to suspect the lad in the forge was the wee bairn I'd taken in as an assistant all those years ago." Why that sneaky bastard son of an albino mongoose! No wonder, all those cryptic hints to stay away from the boyâ€¦

"You mean, all this time, he was duping us? Making us do what he wanted, the little cheat, making us feel in his debt and controlling us with it when he really had no right to-"

Mildew's little tirade stopped with an abrupt squeak when the shaft of a cross bow embedded itself in the column behind him, after passing faintly close to his crotch. Open mouthed looks snapped in the opposite direction.

"I do apologise," said the UglyThug heir with rather unconvincing nonchalance as he held the crossbow in seemingly inexperienced hands. "I had not realised the safety was unlocked. You are, of course, not hurt." Mildew went an unhealthy shade of puce and opened his mouth, but the calm and half-lidded looking UglyThug heir cut him off. "And of course, I find that as you have given me the kind opportunity to answer your question, then no, it does not mean that Berk has been lied to." He began fiddling with the crossbow again, making most of the people in front of him save Mildew step aside to be out of range. "As Hiccup is the heir of this tribe, it was his every right to give orders and direct Berk's army for a defence strategy that safeguarded his own tribe and village. I do not see how any hoodwinking took place; Hiccup was perhaps playing a practical joke, or wished to

return to his journey once he had done his duty by his tribe, so he kept the identity with you that he assumed while travelling. After all," he concluded, stroking the crossbow like a favourite pet, "he is a humble man. Not once did he expect anything from our tribes that we had not offered when he visited, all the while being an equal to me."

There was some murmuring, and Stoick was very glad to see smiles and looks of pride among his villagers.

"He went above and beyond, too; really your son, that lad." That was Fleetfoot, who had come for the village-wide meeting only rarely. "Brought my little girl back to the house when she got it into her head to go after him into the woods and lost herself. Made sure she was safe in her mamma's arms before he left and wouldn't even stay for food or take any thanks, neither. Said it was the least he could do."

"Oh aye, he helped me out at the bakery too, when my lever got stuck on my coal furnace and he was passing by. Mighty strong, both he and his dear night fury. One tug and off it popped, while me - I'd been yanking for hours."

Other people began speaking up; his politeness, his patience with the new riders and new recruits, his rather handsome bearing - that one from Brunhilda, and Stoick was certain she was preening and looking at the mothers of all the unmarried daughters with smug triumph. He would have laughed if that woman didn't terrify him.

The door to the great hall suddenly opened, and it was so unusual in the middle of a meeting that everyone turned to look and the conversation died.

Astrid was standing there, her hair almost in disarray, as if she had it undone and had quickly rebraided it. But her face was radiant with a wide smile and a healthy glow of a delighted flush.

"He woke up," she said, unable to unbend her lips from their stretching smile even to speak. The Hall gave a collective call of happiness, before she went on. "He's asleep again, but it's a proper sleep now, the Goethi says. He shouldâ€|" her voice broke. Astrid, tough, hard girl made of steel and bone, was shaking and trembling while she rested against the heavy door of the great hall, but she seemed to give a rat's arse about it, still looking joyful. "He should be ok, now. Really ok."

The Hall broke into an uproar. Gobber got into the council table and started yelling for mead and music and celebration. The din was jubilant and deafening and a balm on Stoick's ears as he watched the village celebrate his son's return and recovery, glad that his boy had not faded from their hearts and minds, and that his aid and assuredness in this business had cemented his position as heir more than Stoick ever could have. He saw Astrid slip away, still a wide smile on her face, no doubt to return to his boy's side.

He stood to be corrected, but Stoick could have sworn that his son had managed to turn his political engagement into a love match, after not being with his promised for more than a week.

Truly, he was his mother's son.

With a sigh, Stoick returned to the merriment around him, accepting a keg from Gobber and sitting to smile tiredly at his people, who were celebrating his son's courage and spontaneously composing _edda_ as the alcohol blood-level increased.

Stoick himself determined, between swigs and laughter at the verses being launched from one side of the room to the other, that when his son was strong enough, and if his son could stand to look him in the eye and share a room with him some time soon, he would apologise properly, as a man should. As a father should know better to do.

If his son gave him a later, like Stoick had never given his son in years gone by, this time he would be a proper father and take it with both hands.

=0=

The title means 'Interlude'

1 No offense meant towards the Scottish. I'm actually a healthy amount Scot meself. This is actually a reference to 'Blackadder Back and Forth' where the 'romans' are wondering what the moving red hedge is while they stand at Hadrian's wall; it is, of course, the attacking Scots.

=0=

A special mention, here, to one of my reviewers, kane400, who was very helpful in spotting the errors that escaped my net. Cheers, kane!

There are only the three epilogues left; they bookend the story with the three prologues and at the end of the third one I'll leave a few notes on my clues. I've honestly added so many along the way â€" and I wrote this thing over December and January â€" that I'm sure I'm going to forget half of them. Oh well. If you have questions, now's the time to ask, and I can answer them in the final post.

All nudity and bodily functions in this chapter are due to realism and cultural norms of the time and place within which they are set. Please remember that This Is Berk. Some people have toilets and showers. They have wooden tubs and dragon-warmed water.

Not sure about a sequel yet. Please bear in mind that I really am very busy academically, and that will have to come first. Still, if it does come out, I'll probably not bother with this weekly posting lark, and just put it up as a complete chunk after I divide it into chapters and let you binge. And since I **_**hate**_**** this website, I may actually not post it here. Not sure yet on that count either. I'll post a note at the end of 'Becoming' when the time comes. The thing ****_**will**_**** be rated M; fair warning. Remember who's engaged to be married, and who, quite obviously, needs to sort lots of things out as of 'Becoming's ending. The rating is pretty much non-negotiable thanks to those two.

>

Last posts will be over the next three days.

Foxy has been working on 'Braced', the third story in her 'Chasing'-'Stages' AU continuity. The first chapter for this new story will be out next Monday so all of you coming down from 'Becoming' can just start following 'Braced' now. I've had the privilege of sneak peaking, and it is not only up to her standard, but once again pushing the bar; this time with a much funnier and wittier narrative. Foxy's learning curve looks like a skate-rink's up-slope.

****The first Epilogue. Please enjoy.****

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1_

* * *

The next time he woke up, his head was throbbing and ringing, but he had no problem remembering what had happened. He did, in fact, wish that he didn't have to, considering his leg, and the mess he'd made with Troll's Peak (they'd have to rename what was left of it now), and â€¦ dear gods, Astrid â€¦ but eh, it was an occupational hazard. He just hoped he'd be able to find a way to fly with that thing strapped instead of his foot, because there was no way Toothless was going to be grounded again.

"Hey buddy," he said in a whisper, his voice hoarse from sleep as he felt his friend's hot and fishy breath on his face. Toothless's enthusiastic squealing made him wince, but also smile. His heavy eyelids finally gave way, and he still was in the same room - the main room of his childhood hall, he realised - with a fire blazing brightly and light streaming through the windows and cracks in the door. After jumping around the room a little - Hiccup couldn't really stop him, though he tried - the night fury quieted instantly and was by his side in a moment when he tried to rise. It was slow and painful, and he ended up panting more than he cared to, but he was up against the headboard again, on his own.

Although if she didn't object to see the rest again under different circumstances â€

When his breathing was normal again, he opened his eyes, looking

around the quiet room. Astrid hadn't run up to help (thankfully!) so he was assuming she wasn't in the room (she wasn't about to stop doing whatever she'd put it in her head to do with him, he knew. She was Astrid, stubborn as they came). A quick feel under the covers told him that he was covered this time, if only in a short pair of string trousers that were loosely tied. There was a large basin with water on a table by the bed, kept warm by the pan of coals under it, and there were two buckets beside it.

Yeah, Astrid. She'd possibly stepped out for a moment or so, and had made sure to leave everything there for him, just right. She hadn't changed in her steadfastness, and a place in his chest that he knew belonged to her alone leapt up and danced to have found her again.

A door to the right he hadn't noticed before opened, and Hiccup stiffened to see Stoick walk out, looking exhausted with bags under his eyes. A quick glance told the back of his mind that the walled up area had been where his father used to sleep behind a curtain, and that the loft upstairs also was now closed off with wood and reeds, making the hall look smaller, and somehow more comfortable and homey. Astrid's doing, no doubt.

The rest of his brain was too shocked to see his dad bend down slightly to get his beard ruffled and huffed at by his beloved dragon while Toothless accepted a chin scratch from Stoick as if it was the highlight of his mornings. Then a nightmare - oh, Fireworm! - poked it's head out of a corner, and uncurled her large body to re-wind it around Stoick, who took the death-clench as if it was a love pat - which it actually was, seeing as Fireworm was purring as she rubbed her head against the large man's bare arm.

"You're up," Stoick finally said, and Hiccup's mouth was dry, so he nodded. He didn't have the helmet on at all. He looked at his father's face carefully, and when he saw that there was only happiness and hope there, he tried a small smile, which developed into a grin when his father smiled back.

"Yeah - sorry to be a bother," he said quickly, and Stoick shook his head, his smile reaching his eyes. With a shrug, he managed to convince Fireworm to unwind herself from him, and she chased Toothless out of the enlarged door. Odin, how was HE supposed to open that door now?

"Never, Hiccup," Stoick said quietly, and he seemed almost skittish to come closer, as if Hiccup was a massive dragon that would eat him whole if he made a misstep. So Hiccup tried to sit up further, maybe swing his legs - leg, or: hey, legs, like Toothless had fins - off the bed to face his father, but his hand slipped on the sheets and he banged his ear on the headboard.

Stoick was there in an instant, large hands holding him - and Hiccup was at least pleased to see that his dad's hands were smaller on his chest now, that he at least COULD see some skin between the man's large fingers as he helped him turn as he wished, now mismatching feet hitting the ground one after the other. Hiccup flung his arm over the headboard to steady himself. Toothless came back in and up on his other side, curling himself impossibly on the bed and tucking one wing behind his rider, keeping his bed-warm back comfortable as the relative chill of the room hit it.

"Thanks, dad," he said without thinking, and then stopped and bit his lip, looking up at the man. "I mean, I â€¦ um. Can I call you â€¦ that?" he asked quietly, his mouth in a knot as he looked up at his father, his heart beginning to beat faster for reasons other than his physical exertion.

"Oh, son," Stoick replied in a choked voice, and both Toothless and Hiccup gave a startled yelp as Hiccup was engulfed in his dad's large embrace, disappearing into big arms and chest and scratchy beard. "Oh son, my son. I'm so sorry, so, so sorry. To have made you feel like you â€¦ I never meant to make you feel like â€¦"

Hiccup was startled to find his tunic getting wet. He blinked, not quite sure what to do and rather too stiff within his father's embrace to be comfortable. But the tone of his voice broke his heart, making him realise just how much Stoick was feeling right now, and that maybe â€¦ Well, Astrid had said that his dad had taken it to heart, that he didn't see him as a â€¦

The view that had been twisted five years ago, the view of Hiccup and his dad inside his heart, where Stoick waited and Hiccup tried and tried and tried again to prove himself the man his father was waiting for, began to untwist and uncurl from its knotted, burnt shape. Hesitantly, Hiccup raised a hand and curled it in his father's fur cloak, too unsure and suddenly afraid to touch him directly, and Stoick began to shake, more tears splashing down his son's shirt. Hiccup's heart gave a lurch, and slowly he buried his face in his father's neck, feeling more than knowing the arms around him tighten fractionally, ever so tender on his aching body.

"Odin," Hiccup whispered, wryly and with a sad chuckle. "I can't do anything right." Stoick moved away slightly, face unashamedly covered in tears as he thumbed his son's face, and Hiccup finally relaxed, closing his eyes and letting his head fall into his father's massive hand. He was five years old again, and his father was making a booboo go away by putting his big hands on it and saying that Hiccup was a man, and could take his scratched up knees. "Sorry dad," he said in a whisper. "I thought I was doing the right thing when I left. I didn't mean to disappoint you, again." And damnit, Hiccup was not going to be ashamed of the tears leaking out of his eyes. If his dad could cry and still be a tree-trunk of a man, then Hiccup could cry too and be manly. Or whatever passed for Manly in the Hiccup Department, anyway. Toothless huffed at them both, nosing at Hiccup's face, and then left the room. Hiccup was sure he'd understood that the two men needed some moments alone.

"You didn't, you could never," Stoick choked, and his head was buried against Hiccup's shoulder again, and this time his son simply put his arms around him and his nose in his dad's neck.

"I'm sure the time when I blew up the chicken coop came close," Hiccup replied, and a blubbery laugh shook his father, who held onto him tightly enough to make him yelp.

"Sorry, son," Stoick said, letting go abruptly, but not moving away from where he was kneeling in front of Hiccup. A hand hesitated for a moment, and came up to hover on his shoulder. Hiccup ducked into it feeling rather sheepish to suddenly let the emotions bubble up inside him in this manner, and truly feeling like he was a small boy again,

sitting on his father's knee and wishing to be like him and make him proud more than anything in the world.

"How are you feeling this morning," Stoick said with a swallow, almost sounding fearful as his hand hesitantly rested on his shoulder. Hiccup half-smiled up at him, wanting more than anything in the world to make the guilty, terrified look leave his dad's face. He had a white streak in his hair now, and Hiccup's insides tumbled for a moment as he wondered whether it was due to worrying about the errant son who'd gone traipsing about the archipelago, leaving him behind to worry. Hesitantly, he raised his own hand to finger the streak in his dad's hair, and Stoick went stock still as his eyes looked out of their puffy, tired lids with shining hope.

"This is because of me?" Hiccup asked guiltily. To his surprise, Stoick burst out laughing, in big, wobbly guffaws that shook his chest and echoed in Hiccup's own. Hiccup relaxed instantly, his own mouth twisting upwards as he watched his dad laugh in a way that he hadn't seen in â€ years. His dad was happy; Stoick the Vast, his dad, was laughing lightheartedly with his son Hiccup. The younger man looked at his father and smiled more, parts of his chest melting away and leaving behind only a sense of relief and lightness.

"THAT is because of the Thorston twins. I hadn't realised how much you kept them under control by giving them your inventions to play with till you left, son. You blew up that chicken coop once, by mistake. They left us with no chickens and no eggs for months when they got ahold of a keg of gunpowder and mixed it with corn-powder, then fed it to them."

"Oh boy," Hiccup said with a dismayed laugh, his chest hurting all over in the best of ways as he tried to contain the mirth at the somehow pitiful but funny image of exploding chickens.

Stoick shook his head in fond reminisce. "Ruffnut's calmed down since she married, but not a moment too soon. Unrepentant they were too. Said it was glorious."

"I bet it was, in way," Hiccup said, biting his lip and still lost in the funny scene playing behind his eyes. "One minute you have the silly bird, going around going 'kak-kak-kak', and the next, bam!" He chuckled, hugging his chest for a moment as it hurt, and then he was in his dad's arms again, Stoick holding him tenderly.

"I've missed you, son," he said in a choked voice, and Hiccup almost gasped, relaxing bonelessly into his dad. The place that had begun to be soothed when first Gobber and then Astrid had been happy to see him, and when Gobber had said he'd missed him, finally gave out at the bottom, and the hurt fell away to the natural throbbing of a warm heart. He hugged his dad back as hard as he dared.

"I did too, dad. Every day. I was trying to be â€ something better. For you and for Berk."

"You're the best thing that has ever happened to Berk, son," Stoick replied, pushing away and putting both hands on Hiccup's shoulders. "And don't you doubt that again. It is no fault but our own that it took us so long to see it. And no fault but â€" Stoick looked down, and looked back up at Hiccup shyly and apologetically. "No fault but my own that I didn't see what a good man you are. You never

disappointed me, son; not when all you did was try hard, work hard and do whatever you could for Berk and its people. I could not ask for a better son."

Hiccup's shoulders relaxed the rest of the way, and a buoyant feeling overtook his chest as his face finally broke into a relieved smile. The image of Stoick loving him, and loving him, and waiting as Hiccup tried and tried again to prove himself the best son he could be uncurled completely in his chest, reforming from the bent and dented shape it had taken five years ago into a coherent, real, beating thing, alive in his chest.

"I still have a ways to go to be as great a man as you, dad," he said, unable to keep the shy smile off his face. His dad loved him. His dad loved him. His dad loved him. It was the best feeling in the world.

"You're on the road to become a better one," his father said, his own smile wide, and proud. Hiccup's chest felt like it would burst. Maybe he had taken too big a beating and he was going to die from lung failure or something, but for now, it felt like happiness, and Hiccup decided to take it with both hands. "Now come, do you feel up to seeing a bit of sunlight? You can sit on the bench in front of the house, greet people. Gobber's been dying to see what you think about that foot.

Stoick stood, helping Hiccup as he lurched to his feet. The pain in his stump as he put weight on it was sharp and almost paralyzing, taking his breath away both with its physical presence and its metaphysical meaning - his foot was gone, his foot was gone - but he put it away for another moment. Right now, his dad was here, looking down at him as proudly as Hiccup had ever dreamed he would. They still had to talk about the dragons, still had to speak about what he'd done in the past five years - both the things he was proud of and those that he was not - and speak about his future. His father seemed to be implying that he could stay. That he could have a home again. If that was the case, then â€¦ Hiccup would grasp that with every fibre of his being.

But right now, Hiccup was being helped to the door by his dad, who wasn't looking disappointed at all. The look of pride and satisfied serenity that Hiccup had always sought to put on his father's face was there at last, and as he sat beside him on the bench outside the house, and people began to cheer and come up and gather round and make a proper din, Hiccup had his dad's arm around him, finally the son his father wanted, the valid aid and support he deserved, and the son Hiccup had always wanted to be to his beloved father.

=0=

These two have never really needed many words. In the film a particular thing I adore is how their conversation is stilted in the bad times â€" but also in the good times. They don't know how to **speak to one another, but sometimes, they just don't need to. A few words before Hiccup goes up to fight the massive dragon repair everything that's been broken; a few encouraging comments about the boy's missing dragon puts him in a better mood in GotNF. They fight and they quarrel, but they love each other so much at the end of the day that they are gladder to forgive than to be right. And

here, that is why I made sure to outline that what hurt Hiccup the most was not anything his father said, they weren't the ****_**words**_**** that hurt, but the belief of a young boy that his dad no longer loved him. While on the other end, Stoick was a stressed, worried, over-protective father who had no idea how to speak to his intelligent, inventive, ****_**accident prone**_**** son. Foxy and I have recently been discussing the significance of Stoick's age in the second film; If Stoick is already fifty when Hiccup is only 19 or 20, then that means that he and his wife probably couldn't have children for a very long time, and when Hiccup finally came, he must have seemed like a tiny miracle, to be swaddled and loved and protected. So now every single thing that Stoick says in the film takes on a new meaning as an over-protective father trying to keep his son tucked in a safe place, while Hiccup is trying to do what all youths try to do; grow up. I love these two. I really, really, do.**

****Screw romance; the relationship between Hiccup and his dad in HTTYD is one of the sweetest, loveliest examples of human relations that have ever been told in fiction. *gets teary eyed*. Hats off to Sanders, DeBlois and ALL THE TEAM. Here's a toast to an even better film this June.****

****28/3/14 â€" remaining to epilogues will be tomorrow and Sunday.****

20. Epilogue 2 - Present

****Second Epilogue. Please enjoy.****

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 1_

**Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir**

* * *

><p>Present

She hadn't laughed this hard in a long time, Dogsbreath heard the female half of the crazy twins say, and he turned back to look at the female blonde Hooligan warrior again.

She had slipped on a patch of snow and ended up legs upwards, which had thrown her nadder into a series of worried squeaks and gargles as the turnips and cabbages she had been carrying flew everywhere.

Dogsbreath and the female twin had rushed to help her, though the helping had all been taken care of by the other woman and her dragon, while Dogsbreath found himself holding a wiggling little girl. Upon seeing the warrior's pained and embarrassed face, however, Dogsbreath had taken pity on her, and wishing to make his good friend Hiccup's chosen girl feel slightly better, he'd tried to alleviate the mood, to mixed results.

"Don't worry," he'd said, "Hiccup likes his vegetables tossed."

Astrid, as that was her name, was still laughing her head off, bent over to pick up the dropped wares as she re-dropped more than she gathered, Ruffnut looking at her fondly and shaking her head as she called her a stupid clumsy fart, picking up all her spillings, the nadder and zippleback head helping to put them back in the sack.

"Oh, he's completely rubbed off on you," Astrid finally gasped. "That was so totally a joke he would make."

"Yeah, but he'd make it during a council meeting," Ruffnut said, cackling, Dogsbreath offered her the child in exchange for the heavy sack of food, but she looked at him like he was mental and hoisted the sack with one arm as if it were full of feathers. The child gargled at the nadder, who gave her a sniff and then turned to cackle and chirp at the zippleback. Dogsbreath, feeling out of his depth, simply followed the women as they moved towards the chief's house, hoping that someone would relieve him of the wiggly little human eventually.

He had caught up to the two women as he had been going to visit Catt-Hiccup, one last time before he returned to his own island. There was a lot to report back to his father, and a lot of work to do; the Thing would be next Snoggletog, and by the looks of it, the Hooligans would not be able to sail anywhere any time soon, not with their fleet reduced and their Hero in his conditions.

It would be good to come to Berk again, with the happier occasion of the Thing and Snoggletog to keep the rowdier members of all the tribes busy and happy singing Snoggletog songs and drinking a collection of everyone's best ales, which were traditionally brought to Things to help keep things happily just slightly to the left of sober.

As soon as they entered the hut, the women went around depositing the food and readying the pot, the dragons grumbling only minimally to be left outside as they knew they were entering the night fury's inner territory. Toothless immediately ambled up to Astrid, rubbing his head almost aggressively against the girl who laughed again, throwing her arms around the large black head and asking him to light the fire for her.

Dogsbreath finally spotted Hiccup, sitting next to the fire on a comfortable looking chair, bad leg up to the new-born flames and a bemused expression on his face.

"Please tell me those aren't Mildew's cabbages," he said with a laugh when Ruffnut put them down on the table where Astrid usually prepared the meals, judging by the knives and kitchen implements on it. The blonde warrior laughed.

"Oh, no, don't worry. His cabbages may be good, but I don't think I'd buy them off him if he were the last cabbage seller on Berk. They're from Svensen's fields, and finer ones you'll never see!"

"Or smell," Hiccup quipped back, and Dogsbreath sat down next to him with a chuckle, dragging a stool and allowing the night fury to curl up around them both. Hiccup's metal leg was tapping against the stone of the firepit in a jaunty rhythm only he could hear, and this seemed to put an extra shine in Astrid's eyes.

"They don't smell of mould and old people's socks, you mean?" she replied, already having made short work of the vegetables as she made sure to keep the fish she was beginning to clean away from the dragon. Toothless' eyes followed her every movement from his seat, and she finally rolled her eyes and threw him a small salmon, which he growled gratefully for, and which made Hiccup look at her fondly as she laughed and continued. "I know not to buy anything from Mildew. Lord knows what he rubs against those cabbages to make sure the slugs don't get into them."

"Just his armpits, probably," Ruffnut interjected, resolutely ignoring Dogsbreath's entreating eyes as her daughter wiggled to try to sit up, Dogsbreath's fingers firmly in her mouth as she munched on them resolutely. He had to admit, though, the little bundle of blonde hair had a sweet little evil cackle that warmed your heart, even if she WAS biting down on his hand rather hard with her gums.

"Or his socks," Hiccup went on.

"You're both terrible," Astrid admonished with a scrunched up face. "You're going to make me ill just thinking about it."

"Then don't think about it!" Hiccup and Ruffnut said together, looking at one another in astonishment before bursting into uproarious, surprised laughter. The baby gurgled, as if joining in without knowing why, the dragon huffed in amusement, while Astrid kept cleaning the fish, shaking her head with a wry but lighthearted smile on her face at being laughed at.

She was instantly alert when Hiccup sat up, using the chair's handles, and grimaced. Wiping her hand on a rag and dipping them into what looked like ale, she was instantly at his side.

Dogsbreath frowned at the expression that was suddenly on his friend's face as she worried looked at his leg, and then managed to convince him to move with her behind the area they had curtained off for his bed. Ruffnut made a lewd comment, which was only answered with a stilted laugh from Astrid, and some of the happiness had drained from her face as she closed the room off from the bed.

"You have an interesting daughter," he turned to tell the blonde twin, trying to remind her that she did, in fact, have a daughter, who had decided that sucking his thumb was an adequate substitute to sucking her own. Toothless sniggered at him; the smart-arse dragon was too much like his master in that regard.

"She takes after her father," shrugged the woman. "Always looking at things and trying to figure out if she can eat them or not. My ma says it's the same of all babies, but I don't think so. There's just too much of my Fishlegs in her."

"What's her name?" he asked. The woman in front of him went an interesting shade of purple, and looked about to chuck a knife in his direction before Astrid's voice rose from behind the curtain.

"Don't kill the heir of the UglyThugs!"

"HE ASKED!"

"He doesn't know, ok? Take it out on Fishlegs later."

Dogsbreath, confused, blinked between the curtain and the still-angry Hooligan mother, confused relief flashing in him that he had apparently dodged his own demise. Note to self; it was not a good idea to spend too much time with Hooligan mothers, not if one wanted to leave with all limbs still attached.

He was beginning to think that he should perhaps try to marry one.

He would not speak with anyone about this. Thuggory would never let him live it down.

There was a giggle from behind the curtain, and Ruffnut gave it an evil look as she took up Astrid's task to put the vegetables and the chopped fish into a small cauldron and lifting it onto the hook above the fire, tipping water into it from the drinking box. A small murmur, with a tone of wry amusement and rather snarky assuredness that was a mark of Hiccup's humour followed, which then produced more snorting and chortling. When the curtain was opened and the two returned to the fire, Astrid was holding him up, a spark in her eye, while Hiccup was looking down at her with longing, as if she was standing on the other side of a crowded mead hall, instead of right beside him and seemingly unable to take her hands away from him, even after she had helped him into the chair and tried to return to the cooking. Dogsbreath smirked as she needlessly smoothed his hair out of his eyes and straightened already straight clothing, and then he looked at his friend's flushed face.

It would be interesting to see where his friend was going to be next Snoggletog. Dogsbreath was getting a rather good education just looking at him handling various different sorts of ladies; the ones he didn't want on Bog and the other islands, and the one he rather obviously wanted here.

He had to remember to bring some parchment next time. Though he didn't need them for a while, he had to take notes.

=0=

****Penultimate chapter, everyone. A quiet, domestic scene that holds many clues for the future.****

****A lot of you have been asking about the sequel. Yes, one would, technically, be in the works. No, there is no prospective date. Please be patient and know I'll do my best. Meanwhile just sit back, relax, and enjoy Foxy's 'Braced' next Monday.**
>

****This is also your last chance to ask questions: As I said, I have forgotten a few of the things I put in as it's been almost four months for me. Either way, I have a short list up already.****

****The last epilogue will be up tomorrow, 30****th**** March 2014. Cheers, all.****

****Final Epilogue. Please enjoy.****

Berkian Eddur - 1****

Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir****

Future

It was the first sunny day in two weeks.

Well, sunny was relative. It wasn't galing and the hail had let up. The snow hadn't visited them again for now, and the sun had peeked out once from between the clouds that morning.

For five minutes, but who was counting?

Astrid smiled as she ducked her head in through the door, where all the tribe was gathered.

"Is this really necessary," came the whispered complaint from behind her. Hiccup was sitting on Toothless, who had carried him up the stairs. She bit her lip, unable to stop smiling as she looked back at him. He looked fantastic even though she would never admit that she was looking (her mother, of course, had noticed without needing to be told), dressed in a crisp, fresh, newly sewn tunic, lined in deer fur on the inside and covered in the best embroidery she could make, a bear-skin cloak borrowed from his father clasped to his shoulders, suede trousers brushed and metal bits polished to a shine.

His face was a study in pouting, however, and it almost made her chuckle. She held her mirth in by a hair, but his dragon wasn't that nice, openly chortling at his petulant rider.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, we'll see about that," Hiccup answered what was, quite obviously, an open challenge from dragon to man. Rolling his shoulders and sitting up straight (and doing rather strange things to Astrid's insides in the process), he unhooked his metal foot from the clip in his equally metallic and mechanised stirrup and slid off, standing carefully. He finally put weight on his dominant leg, now more used to the metal part of itself, even if the wound at its apex hadn't quite closed yet.

Astrid was there instantly, and like always, Hiccup couldn't look at her when he let her help while he adjusted, shrugging her touch off as soon as his dragon got into position. Her heart twinged, and some of the day's lightness dimmed, but then he gave her a shy look with tinged cheeks and she smiled back for him. She had never pegged Hiccup as a proud man, but she supposed everyone had an amount of it, and tiny or large, Hiccup's pride seemed to find a limit in being helped to stand.

She hoped it wasn't just being helped by a woman. She really hoped it wasn't. The last five years couldn't have changed him that far, could they?

There was of course also the possibility that he didn't want to feel the touch of another woman save her, but she wasn't going to think about it today.

"Ready?" she asked him, the bubble of excitement superseding anything else as she moved back to the doors of the Great Hall.

"Yeah, ok," he replied. She pushed them open, and then took her place on his other side as Toothless helped him walk in with a straight back, one of his hands spread out on the dragon's broad back, and Astrid clasped the other, looking up at him happily when he didn't stiffen, and only looked at her with a return of colour to his face.

The whole of the tribe was in the Hall, and all of them cheered when they saw him walk in, almost under his own steam after two weeks of recovery. Summer had left them behind, but Autumn and the winter coming were carrying on the warmth as all the people of Berk closed in around them, the Hall's doors banging shut against the chill air and the warm fires and braziers inside, as well as the people's smiling faces and raised mead kegs, made the room brighter where the sun could not.

They were slow to get to the front, between Hiccup's sedate pace and the people making a path around him in their own time as everyone enjoyed exchanging a word or a touch with Berk's hero. Snotlout, who had had a lengthy talk with his cousin in private, came up to slap him on the back - forcefully, but with a smirk on his face - to which Toothless answered with a healthy whack of a tail as soon as they passed by, which knocked the Viking off his feet. Catcalls of having two girlfriends - both equally as violent - went up in the Hall, and Astrid found herself colouring slightly and looking up at him hopefully. But as always, Hiccup only blushed, chuckled and didn't respond in any way.

They arrived at the front, finally, and Fishlegs was waiting there with his clan and Ruffnut, holding their little girl in his arms swaddled in as many warm blankets as could be practical while still allowing her to be held by human arms. Her tiny eyes peeked out, entertained and entranced by all that was happening outside of her blanket nest, and she instantly held up tiny arms for Toothless as she spotted him. Astrid watching the dragon's body go stiff with eagerness, but he still kept his friend's pace, and only reached up a nose to be chuckled and patted at by the child when they arrived on the raised platform, Astrid restraining herself with difficulty from helping him climb up. The look of satisfaction when he managed to mount the dais on his own however was worth the worry gnawing at the pit of her stomach.

"I'm sure you know why we're all here!" His father's voice boomed as soon as Hiccup was standing behind him. There was a call and cheers from the crowd. "This is the first day of Autumn Harvest, and this next Winter is upon us, with all its sacrifices and its hardships. But the granaries were almost filled, the hens and the yaks secured. The ale is plentiful and the bread is fresh, so we will face it all as we do every year; with filled stomachs and each other's merry company!"

A cheer rose to this, with many and 'aye' and raised keg.

"But no Winter will be as special as this one," he went on. He turned towards Hiccup, a smile on his face that Astrid had never seen before. If there had ever been open love and pride and happiness on Stoick's face, it was at that moment as he looked at Hiccup, who

answered Stoick's hand extended back towards him with a step forward without thinking, falling against the larger man with little show as the chief held him up. "Because this Winter will mark the new start in the history of our tribe. No longer will we have to fear hunger and pain, raids, homes and fields on fire. Now, those dragons that we fought and fought us back are our loyal friends, and this in no small part to my son," he looked down at Hiccup with shining eyes, "who has returned to Berk older, wiser, and braver than we could have hoped for."

"Hear hear!" Gobber yelled, and another cheer went up. Astrid bit her lip, cheeks hurting from smiling so much as she watched Hiccup's face flush as his father's chest puffed out and he held him closer to his side. Hiccup was now almost as tall as Stoick, though the older man still retained a few inches on his son, and his meaty arm went around Hiccup's wide back comfortably. Astrid smiled at them, so glad for their reconciliation that she could burst. Both men looked so much happier for it.

"And now, to add to our happiness, a new little one of our tribe has gone unnoticed long enough in the tumultuous happenings of the last few weeks. And it is with great pleasure and with the blessing of Odin and Frigga, that I introduceâ€¦" He leaned down as Fishlegs strode up, holding his playful little girl, who was still trying to reach for Toothless and Fireworm, (who had cautiously nosied up to hide behind Stoick, the large nightmare still slightly wary of large crowds, but unwilling to leave her rider out of her sight for more than necessary) "â€¦ Woodnut Ingermann!"

A call rose up from the Ingermann clan on the dais and the Thorston clan in the Hall, and the rest of the tribe in the Hall answered, kegs being raised and liquid being sloshed sufficiently to entertain the young baby after the noise startled her. Secure as she was in Stoick's hands, all the blankets and wiggling caused her to slip, only to be caught by an attentive Fireworm, and delivered to her grandmother's arms (as the grandfather was rather too occupied holding Ruffnut back from murdering Stoick). Astrid almost choked with laughter at the identically sheepish look on Hiccup and Stoick's face and body language. Fishlegs, still standing beside Stoick, cleared his throat and whispered something else, which made Stoick beam at him. With a hand wave towards his wife, Ruff came forward (and could not resist elbowing Stoick as Fishlegs' mother gave her Woodnut to hold), and Stoick cleared his throat again over the cheering.

"Our good master Ingermann has told me that he has decided on a godparents for his daughter, and since she is being presented so late, we will announce the godparents together with the name."

"Might as well make it wholesale!" Ruffnut's mother called from the crowd. "Next time you might actually manage to drop her!"

A laugh rose, to which Stoick replied with a good natured wave before he joined in himself. Hiccup chuckled at his father's expense, getting his hair ruffled for his trouble.

"The child's godmother is you, Gerda, you old fool!" Stoick called to Ruff's mother, who laughed and rose up to the dais to hug her son-in-law. "And of course, her godfather, with both families'

consent, is my son Hiccup."

Hiccup looked utterly stunned, receiving the giggling Woodnut only with automatic movements, and Stoick's arm around him keeping him steady. Toothless began wiggling in excitement as he wound his body tightly around his rider, making Astrid wonder if he thought the child was being given to Hiccup to keep.

Hiccup looked down at the child with awe, and then a look of utter adoration came over his face as she reached up and giggled. The strange feeling in Astrid's chest that had nested there and only grown since 'Cattongue' had flown into her life rose to the surface, swelling larger and larger as it pushed the walls of her chest, and then burst, leaving her breathless and full of a plethora of new emotions that were buzzing inside her too quickly and too warmly for her to think on. All in all, the feeling she was left with was one of heart-racing excitement at simply looking at Hiccup, holding a child and smiling, standing on his own as his father's arm came away and the dragon turned to nose the child's tiny bottom gently in play. Her heart beat almost painfully in her chest as she watched Hiccup surrounded by all of Fishlegs' family, and the Hall beyond the dais swelling in contented cheering and drinking songs and the first strains of the Berkian Edda, which despite Hiccup's blushing protests, was becoming a prominent pass-time of drunken evenings and was even being transcribed into writing to join the works in the hall which spoke of Hamish and Grimbeard.

More than anything, she wished that she could step forward and join that family closing in around Hiccup. But for now, the emotions in her chest, all large and throbbing, rooted her to the ground as she watched it all, happiness washing over her to see him smile again; and laugh again; amongst his people again.

He was home. Hiccup was home. It was going to be a beautiful Winter.

ENDIR

****This is the end â€" but perhaps not completely. Also, as promised, here are the plot points you may have missed:****

****I'm going by character. Hiccup â€| wooh, so many for him. To start off, Hiccup gives himself away several times during the story:

****1) They are not yet on Berk before he says that the walk from Troll Peak only adds half an hour to the journey. He then proceeds to say a number of familiar things, and Astrid also recognises Cattongue's 'coldness' from the one time she got him angry; in the Arena, when she said his father was ashamed of him.****

****2) Fishlegs noticed early on, but I left the signs there: After a day of watching her brother train, and then gathering information from Cami, Ruff takes it all home to her husband, who has come from the Peak with all the plans for the contraptions in mind. He realises who's behind the mask while eating his wife's gull stew, and confirms it to himself throughout the rest of the story.****

****3) In the smithy, he hands Gobber his hand without realising it, but that is a double hint. Yes, he gave himself away by anticipating**

Gobber's request, but he also does it the rest of the time by ****_**knowing where everything is**_****. Gobber doesn't openly state it, but Brunhilda noticed this in other areas while she was speaking with Astrid.**

****4)** As Brunhilda said, he was always extra polite to the important people; you can see this in the way he treats the Generals and Stoick during the meetings, but even before that, on the dragon Island before he knew, conceivably, who the chief of that tribe was. Brunhilda also notices that he doesn't know the younger children, and in the scene with Dartfoot, a hint that Astrid only gets partially is that ****_**he realises immediately where Dartfoot lives as soon as she says her elder sister's name**_****. Dartbolt is eight years old, and Hiccup has been gone for five, so he knows her and knows where she lives, while Dartfoot was born during his absence. While Astrid got the surface hint that he knew where everything was, the real hint was that he knew who ****_**Dartbolt**_**** was and where she lived. Astrid missed it completely.**

****5)** There are, of course, the obvious hints, where he laughs, or he makes stupid mistakes, which a lot of you giggled or waved a fist at. I purposefully had Hiccup make stupid mistakes, because he's Hiccup. He learned to be independent and street-smart. Unfortunately, no amount of time will make you unlearn how to be yourself.**

****6)** I used familiar quotes from the film on several occasion, sometimes as an ironic echo, but almost every time as a way to tip people off as to what his identity is. An example: Hiccup is leaving the Goethi's hut, and says his very familiar 'pain' quote in front of Astrid, who almost manages to figure him out there-and-then.**

****7)** According to the Viking Answer Lady website, before the event of Christianity, there was no stigma in the Viking society regarding Left Handedness. Hiccup is left-handed both in the book and (subtly) in the film. He is similarly left handed here, with the largest hint being during the raid chapter, where Hiccup transfers his sword to his right hand to deliver a punch.**

****Dragons:****

****In chapter 8, the nadder is said to have become a bit of an escape artist, getting caught and escaping again, and taking other dragons with her. This was a double hint; the dragon herself is Stormfly, and the 'one of the other dragons' she helped escape was Meatlug. None of the other cast dragons have appeared in my narrative, and I am assuming that they are dead. I have been wrong before, but this time I don't think so. An additional hint to the nadder's identity was the fact that the first time Astrid flies her, it's during a downpour.****

****Snotlout:****

****I don't believe in character bashing. His characteristics here and their unfortunate epilogue was a result of some thought on my part about Snotlout in the books and Snotlout in the film. He seems to be a much more benign and feeling character in the film than in the books " I utterly detested him when I read them first. However, he does have an ego problem which is not altogether unjustified. Even if Astrid is the next in line, technically, his reasoning regarding her future is pretty solid; had Hiccup NOT come back, taking the post of**

heir or not, she would either have had to marry and perpetuate the line, or chose an heir herself. Snotlout is at least related to Stoick â€" if not by blood, as I am assuming the different surname means that Spitelout is Val's brother â€" so he would have been a good choice. Had Astrid remained unmarried, the next heir would probably have been Snotlout's children, as they were next of kin to the Haddock clan. **

Then I added a dash of real Viking politics and it all went to Hel in Loki's hand-basket. Snotlout is the first son of this father, who is the head of his household, and is therefore next in line to be the head of household. Taking Spitelout's attitude from the little we've seen of him towards his son, there was a relative amount of disdain which turned Snotlout into a glory hog in order to keep his dad happy. I gave that disdain a reason here; I hinted slightly that his sisters' husbands were living in the Jorgensen hall with them, and that this is a highly irregular occurrence. It is; women joined their husband's clan like Ruff and Astrid did. Snotlout is utterly justified in thinking that they are trying to win his father's favour and steal the right of head-of-house from him. This is tied to the fact that Snotlout has refused every single time his father tried to talk to him about offering a marriage contract to other women. Snotlout's duty is to get married and make little Louts to carry on the line. Due to this, his father is constantly on his case and losing trust in him fast. His reaction, therefore, to seeing Astrid with another man, if not justified (one can never justify violence, Viking culture or not), is at least understandable. He's losing his place in his own home holding out for her, and she threw herself (in his perspective) at the first nobody who came along.

Stoick:

Most of you got it, while some of you still want to see him in that pit with the Red Death. I understand this; to be honest, the birth of this whole story was that moment in time in the film, where if you look close enough, Hiccup's heart breaks on-screen the moment Stoick utters his 'worst Viking' line. It made me very, very angry at Stoick, but it also made me re-watch the movie with a focus on Hiccup's dad, and the results were astounding. First off; Props to the digital artist who was focussing on Stoick. Serious Props. Secondly, I noticed that from the very start, Stoick's angry face is seen only when he's dealing with dragons. Even when he's chastising Hiccup at the end of the raid, there is more exasperation and worry there than real ire. His scene with Gobber is very telling; the look of utter PRIDE on his face when Goethi chooses him is there for a split second, but if you **_pause**_** in that moment. Oh boy. The pride is fierce, and loving.**

**So it led me to see Stoick as a misguided, impossibly lost father, who can't communicate with his son if you gave him flash cards to do it, but is trying his best to juggle both a village AND being a father, which he is hopeless at. The notion of 'later' was born from the scene where, after the raid, Stoick tells Gobber to take Hiccup home â€" a sort of 'we'll talk about this later' veiled threat â€" while the rest of Stoick's emotions are intrinsically tied to the scenes where Stoick's shell cracks; being the ones where he denounces his son â€" Gerard Butler's voice breaking there is fantastic, but then the animator had Stoick balk, and it just breaks your heart â€" as well as the end, with 'I did this'. Then Foxy and I found out that

he is so old in the second film, meaning that he had Hiccup very late, especially when you think the life expectancy here is about 35? 40? It takes on a whole new level of horrible conditions for two equally stubborn, equally emotionally-retentive characters to communicate in their day-to-day lives. Hiccup has his share of guilt, in that during his quest to prove himself, he REALLY did make his father's job so much more difficult. He knows this, and it is part of why he cannot really deny the fact that he deserves part of the stigma he receives. Hiccup is a better person than I am.**

In the scene where Stoick needs to go to the healer, it is not the fact that he is concussed that enables him to recognise Hiccup's voice. The fact that he is dizzy, on the other hand, allows him to suspend his prejudices, which are keeping him blind, and the fact that Hiccup's face is literally at his shoulder makes it possible for him to hear his voice well, despite the muffling of the helmet.

This feeds into Stoick's 'blindness' conceit which I've worked into the story. Stoick has been looking at Cat tongue throughout 'Becoming' with clear view in all the times where he has been suspecting him, but the one time where he actually **is blind is the time where he sees. I was being a presumptuous little cunt, and took this from **King Lear**'s famous quote 'I stumbled when I saw'. Thankfully, I'm not as horrid to my characters' happy endings as Shakey-boy is.**

Law and Politics:

From research I have done on medieval literature and medieval England, (hi there Chaucer, you trollop "chasing skank") there was one thing that was essential, unbreakable, and horrible to lose in the time's society. The value of your word.

A word given, and an oath made, were considered to be sacred and protected by the Christian God, but the notion of honour and word-value was something that was universally accepted as almost a currency. This makes Stoick's 'later' transgressions above with his son a little heavier, but also serves their purpose to put a spotlight on words given and words kept. Stoick needed some work, but he came through with his son in the end. I am taking some liberties in assuming that the same rules count for the Viking culture, however from what I have read about their laws and norms and values, it seems to be equally important. Not to mention that the rules regarding debts that seem to indicate that it is a rather educated guess.

**Something else that is definitely important and that is a debt incurred. In a documentary I watched about Viking culture, this was such serious business that people killed each other over it. As I've said in the relevant chapter, settling a debt was very, very important, and asking for things by the person who is owed the debt is very normal. The part where Berk did not owe Hiccup a debt because he was a Hooligan was slightly stretched; technically, people could still owe debts to each other when they belonged to the same tribe, or even the same clan. Debts can be owed when people owe each other money, or when a life is saved. In actuality, Berk still owed Hiccup a debt. But in reality, what Gobber is saying is that Hiccup would probably not see it as a debt at all " he did not, as Stoick pointed out, and just used it as a means to help Berk. Hiccup himself

says several times while he's still Cattongue that Berk owes him nothing.**

****Astrid:****

****There was a lot of interaction with Astrid, and most of the hints were resolved within the story itself, as they pertained with Hiccup's identity. Astrid was realising who Hiccup was slowly, between his kindness, his mannerisms, and especially the moments where he lost his temper. Astrid in my head has a backstory of a childhood friendship with Hiccup " which would be more explored in the sequel if/when it gets done " and his loss of patience in the arena when she called him out on his behaviour was something that remained impressed on her mind because of its rarity. Therefore, every time Cattongue loses his patience, Astrid's memory is tickled severely.****

****Women's hair: In many cultures even today, women's hair, or hair in general, is considered to be a sensual, private part of her or him. The website for the Viking Answer Lady states that after marriage women had their hair gathered into a particular knotted style. I have not been able to find evidence of a veil covering the hair too " a number of documentaries actually dismiss it because there was not enough archaeological evidence. However, the VAL website has enough evidence to show that married women, definitely, tied their hair back in a knot after marriage. This leads to the educated assumption therefore that women's hair has a romantic/sexual significance in this culture. All the women in the film have gathered hair. Granted, it's daft to have it down in battle anyway. However, I'm going down the path of adding two and two to make four and " considering the admitted research that went on in HTTYD (Stoick and Hiccup's clothes, armour, and Astrid's tunic and kransen) " I feel safe in doing so. Astrid's hair being down, therefore, in the scene with Snotlout, has all of this added cultural significance to it where Astrid was wilfully being more intimate than she should ever have been with a 'stranger'. Had that not been Hiccup, it may have been grounds to dismiss her engagement into the leading family of the village.****

****The Title:****

****I agonised for a while about what to call this story, until I remembered the legend of the end of earth in the Norse Mythos. 'Becoming' " the original working title " became 'Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir'. A lot of readers have asked about the title's meaning, so here it is:****

****In the original legend, a long Winter wipes out most of life on earth, with famine and war, while the world serpent Jörmungandr fights with Thor and the rest of the gods. At the end of this battle, there are only two humans left; LÃ-f and LÃ-fÃ¼rasir. LÃ-f is the female of the pair, while LÃ-fÃ¼rasir is the male. According to what I have found, LÃ-f means 'life', and LÃ-fÃ¼rasir has dual meaning. It is 'LÃ-f's lover', having the obvious implication that they would repopulate earth, but it also means 'lover of life'. ****

****Both meanings are important here. The first one is reference to Hiccup's relationship with Astrid " he is quite in love with her, and their current political arrangement foreshadows a relation that will, eventually, lead to the wedding bed. The second meaning,**

though, is tied to Hiccup alone. He has spent the last five years roaming the world and believing that he was very much unloved and unwanted by the people he cared for most. And while he had more than his share of happy moments, that is a belief that would weigh anyone down. As one of my great, sharp readers has pointed out, 'Becoming LÃ-fÃ¼rasir' is not about grand adventures, romps, fights, seeking revenge or keeping grudges. It's about redemption, forgiveness and reconciliation.**

The meaning of 'LÃ-fÃ¼rasir', therefore, takes on the aspect of a hope; Hiccup, with his bridges mended, can now once again begin to enjoy and love his life. He can become a 'lover of life' once more.

Thing â€" or 'Ãžing**'

The Thing is a nod towards the original books, where it is a meeting of the allied tribes from all the archipelago; but also on the VAL website, a 'Ãžing**' is described as a semi-religious activity that took care of legal affairs within the community. Obviously, the author of the books did her research and I have to admit; calling it 'The Thing' is just so ridiculous to our modern diction even if it was its real original name that it fits the 'devil-may-care' attitude the Vikings have in books.**

So what do Dogsbreath's thoughts mean? Oh, I don't know, maybe it's a clue. And isn't this where I talk about clues? Yup â€" but I won't talk about this one, because â€" well, look down.

Other, unresolved issues:

Mainly, the 'Ãžing**, Snoggletog, Snotlout and Josepha. But of course, my deariesâ€" there must be some things left over for sequels, savvy? As well as the bent and dented relationship with Astrid. Hiccup and Astrid have a lot to work out between them, because they are both projecting their own insecurities on the other. The final hint is the very last word of this story; it has a lot of significance.**

Anything else?

Yes, lots of other things. Some things I may have admittedly forgotten â€" I'm not super human â€" but there are other things I do **_not**_** want to dictate on. The relationship of respect between reader and writer is something I believe in greatly, and the reader contributes as much as the author to a story, living it, each reader in their own unique and great way. Whether a story is liked or disliked, it is lived, and therefore you all, as readers, have the right to understand what you like with this story.**

So finally, thank you all for reading. May you enjoy a thousand good narratives, and a tip of the cap to all my sharp, honest and polite reviewers, who made this a learning experience as well as an intensely beautiful one; and my gratitude to have been on this romp with me.

22. Note and Preview

**As promised, there is going to be a sequel to Becoming, and it will

be called 'Winter in Lif's Holt'. **

**This sequel, as is my habit, is completely written and will be going up AS A WHOLE. The story is done, and it's coming up online tomorrow, chapter after chapter, as a completed story. And again as promised, I'm leaving a note up for all of you to see on Becoming, so that you may be alerted to the sequel's forthcoming arrival. If you ask me, anyone how has me on author alert should switch me off this weekend, because I will be flooding your inbox like a professional spam bot extraordinaire. **

A large, large thank you to all my readers who left me sweet, dear notes " both complements and constructive-criticism. I adored the polite reviews that told me what they disliked, what disappointed them and what made them so angry they wished they could reach through screen and murder a few characters. I am professionally a member of the school of thought that takes reader-response into consideration as part of literary criticism, and I belong to the Wolfgang Iser school of thought. So your responses, for me, are a treasure throve of beauty, and also applied proof for all the theory I write and study.

A thank you in particular to people who left me notes on the last few chapters, which I have not been able to answer personally because I am dying with a deadline. Seriously, sleep is a long lost friend. Particularly, a tip-of-the-cap to the reviewer who left me the sarcastic note about gunpowder. I heard that note in Jay Baruchel's voice, and I almost got chucked out of the library because I was snorting and laughing like a total git. The thing is, though I try to be as accurate as possible with the history, there are anachronisms here, mostly, because there are quite a few in the film and in the two series that have come out. Case in point, the moment where the first strain of the song 'ready the ships' is heard in the film, a man is seen pushing a cart down before the camera pans out. The cart is full of **_potatoes**_**, which really shouldn't be there at all. Reference to the book, perhaps? Possibly, but an anachronism nonetheless. Similarly, the twins have gunpowder because **_**Mildew**_** has gunpowder. He blows up the armoury in 'In Dragons we Trust' with it. So the twins got to have gunpowder.**

Will the sequel have mind games, guessing games, clues and red-herrings? Yes. Not as much as Becoming, but yes. In fact, there is a lot of political manoeuvring in Holt, especially because the Thing is happening in it, and all the loose ends from Becoming are being tied up as best as possible.

This story is also a monster that would not end. It would NOT. I began writing it when I was still posting Becoming and I only finished NOW. Literally this week. It was a nightmare, but once I'd started it there was no way I was letting it go. The end finally did come, of course, but it has been a long-suffered journey on my end. I will admit that I have not liked this as much as I liked Becoming " it is less elegant, and more " well, romance, I will say it. I like romance as much as your next girl, but writing it feels like drudgery to me. But it was more than necessary, as the largest, most important loose end to Hiccup's life was his relationship with Astrid. There is subplot, politics, subterfuge and a lot of other intrigue going on, but the main backbone will be the love blossoming between them and how they tackle it.

****Or don't tackle it. These two are honestly a mess.****

****But I personally **_**hate**_** it when I think a complete story has X number of chapters, and then the last one turns out to be an author's note. So for all of you, here is a preview of the first prologue.****

* * *

><p>Berkian Eddur - 2_

**Winter in LÃ-f's Holt**

* * *

><p>Long Winter's Start

LÃ-f

**What good is the warmth of Summer, without the cold of Winter to give it sweetness?**

â€• _**John Steinbeck**_

Astrid walked towards the well, her beloved nadder making sure to shield her from the rain with an extended wing. Ever since the battle that had killed the Red Death and brought Hiccup back to Berk, her nadder had been an inseparable and intrinsic part of her life. In the final moments, when she'd seen Hiccup being flung off Toothless' back, and had thrown herself off Stoick's dragon, her nadder's name had burst from her mouth.

In that moment, as she fell through the sky and watched the nadder hurtle towards her, she knew that this dragon would be her loyal battle sister for the rest of their life. It was true that the dragon had perhaps responded to her being in danger rather than instinctively knowing that Astrid had given her a name seemingly ordained by Freyr, but Astrid couldn't help thinking that Stormfly had always known her name, in the same way that Astrid had also always known it, and retained it, for fear of getting too attached to the illusion of peace between human and dragon.

Now Stormfly answered to her name in an instant, and Astrid knew she would die to protect this dragon, as Stormfly would die to protect her.

"Stormfly, darling," she called up, her dragon putting a head under her wing to look at Astrid." Can you blow some fire down that well for me? Good girl!" She was obeyed right away, and Astrid then lowered the bucket into the now-melted water at the bottom of the well. It would freeze over again in a little while, but since the advent of dragons, it truly had become a joy to wash in the Winter, where before it was one of the horrible chores that no one looked forward to.

Even if the bath at the end was always worth it. Blushing slightly, she hugged the bucket to herself and hurried home, trying to get there before the water froze in the pail. Stormfly raced after her, a wing always cocked to cover her from the freezing rain as they

mounted the hill up to the Haddock hall.

The warmth engulfed her as soon as she entered the closed dragon shed. Between her nadder, Stoick's nightmare and Toothless, all now beloved companions, they had not been able to accommodate them all indoors in the main hall, but were not about to leave them out in the Winter freeze, either. The same problem had occurred with almost everyone on Berk. So most of the village had found itself scrambling with last minute construction, fighting against time as the weather had become less and less favourable for any outdoor activity. The Haddock hall had been the one leading the way; the building designs that had begun going up around Stoick's home, with Gobber giving a hand, had by far been the most efficient, and others had quickly begun copying it.

It had of course come out of Hiccup's quill. While he had been unable to help in the actual construction, and hadn't been cleared to fly yet while the construction was going on, he had put his mind to the problem with an alacrity and an efficiency that spoke of long practice in problem solving and skills acquired through experience and hard work. Thanks to him, working closely with Fishlegs and the other woodworkers including herself, they had managed to finish the shelters before the second snowfall in the third week of Autumn.

Astrid put the pail down in the dragon barn for a moment, long enough to open the heavy wooden door for her dear dragon. Stormfly gave her a hand with her snout, and then walked in, gently shutting the wooden door behind her a bat from her armoured tail. With a chin-scratch in thanks, Astrid took the last bucket of water up, passed through the door that had been cut out of the hall's side, and entered the main room with the warm, merry firepit, shuddering as the higher temperature of the hall's main room made her notice how cold she was.

"Alright?" Hiccup smiled from his place, looking up from the wooden plank on his lap he was using as a writing desk. Toothless, the only dragon who could pass through the door between the barn and hall, was curled up at Hiccup's feet, snoring lightly as he basked in the fire's warmth. As a firebreathing reptile, he didn't need the warmth, but everyone in the tribe knew that Toothless was spoilt, and everyone was more or less to blame, seeing that his status as a hero alongside his rider had made him everyone's favourite. It also didn't hurt that he was the first dragon that had begun playing with the children and keeping them safe, occupying his time as his rider recovered by letting a variety of ages totter up to him, climb on and then carefully be walked squealing around in circles, spreading his wings in mock flight to cause calls and giggles.

Astrid looked fondly at the dragon before closing the barn door behind her. She knew Stormfly would make herself comfortable, and Fireworm was already curled up in sleep. The days were getting shorter, and ten hours of sunlight was all they got at the moment, so the reptiles tended to sleep and rise early with it, or even before it. She smiled back at Hiccup, who tilted his head at her.

"I'm fine," she said with a warm chuckle, putting the bucket down and taking her damp fur coat to hang on a knob to dry. "Has Toothless been out with the children again?"

Hiccup's smile widened, his eyes twinkling in the firelight. "Out with the first light, and come back covered in snow and wearing someone's yak-wool hat." He waved it around as proof, causing Astrid to snort. She came around the fire pit, moving to the tiny room beside Stoick's bed chamber. It had taken her quite a while to get used to having a separate bathing room, not when Astrid had grown up dragging the wooden tub out of its corner on washday and having everything happen within the same large room. But the chief's hall was the chief's hall, and the small perks of being the leading family on Berk were hers also, now that she had joined the clan.

Well, she said joined, but in realityâ€¦

She shook her head, emptying the last bucket into the tub. Stoick had bathed this morning already, and Astrid had dutifully emptied the bath and filled it again, though it had taken her almost all the remaining short morning. Stoick always bathed first, as head of the household, and took his weapons with him. Astrid had then used the same water to wash Stoick's linens, putting some to the boil on the fire outside. But Hiccup deserved and needed clean water, so the tub had been emptied, scrubbed, and now refilled. The fire on one side of the tiny room made it toasty, and with a bite to her lip, Astrid quickly undressed, remaining only in her long white under-linen that reached her knee. Quietly, so as not to disturb Hiccup yet, she walked into the main room, gently shaking Toothless up, and he heated the water for her with two blasts. For all the work he saved her, he was content with only a few head-scratches and cuddles as payment .

And with a blush and an uncomfortable roll of her shoulders, she couldn't put it off any longer. As soon as Toothless had pushed his way out of the main hall to go nap in his stall of the dragon barn, Astrid poked her head out of the bathing room and stalled a moment more. Hiccup was concentrating on what he was drawing, quill sliding over the parchment in smooth, inked strokes as he paused only to dip into the inkwell or to scribble something on the sides. She leaned against the door jamb, ignoring the heat escaping into the slightly-less-warm main hall room, watching his skilled fingers and the muscles of his hand and arm bunch up and relax in the firelight, lip firmly in his teeth as he consulted another piece of parchment that looked like it had calculations on it.

A glowing warmth had lodged in her chest some months ago, and it rolled with new heat every time she looked at him and discovered something new that she had come to like about him. The way his hair flapped back when he flew without his helmet, how intensely he stared at things, how he waved his hands animatedly when he spoke, and how he laughed, really, really laughed, when something funny happened to tickle his humour, like the prank Tuffnut had played on Gobber last week that ended up with the blacksmith covered in yak-milk and evading the terrors trying to lick it off him.

And now, another thing that she could dwell on and smile at later; how concentrated he got as he worked on something, forgetting everything else around him as the paper he was writing on became the his whole reality. It was a silly, dangerous trait that could get him captured or worse, but there was little chance of that, not when Stoick, Toothless and Astrid herself always made sure to have one eye on him.

Stoick and Astrid especially. They weren't about to let him disappear into thin air again.

Hiccup suddenly huffed, a frown bringing his sharp brows down as he threw his quill into the ink and groaned. "I'll have to ask Fishlegs," he said to himself in a resigned voice. Astrid moved closer, giving his work a look over his shoulder and realising he was trying to design a wooden winch large enough to lift a barn door. The warm place in her chest gave another roll; she'd heard Sven the younger huffing and puffing about how long it took to do that without the dragons, who couldn't always be coaxed to fly in a cautious enough manner. Obviously, Hiccup was trying to find a solution and make the village's life better and easier again.

"What is it?" she asked. Hiccup started slightly, but brightened when he looked at her.

"I don't know how much give this wood has, do you?"

"Pine or oak?" she asked, reaching in front of him and taking the paper.

"That's what I need to decide," he replied. It was a point of pride that Astrid was a woman and knew how to read; she had been lucky enough that Hiccup's mother had often let her play with him as a child, and he had always been generous with his knowledge. He had unknowingly taught her how to read and write, and she had been smart enough to pick it up from their play. The parchment now told her that the wood needed to have minimal give around the metal wires, as the friction would eat it away to dangerous results, but the wood that the mechanisms would be embedded in needed to be soft enough to handle.

"Go with the pine for this part," she said, pointing to his diagrams of the cogs' insertions, "and the oak for the metal wire. Oak's sturdier - but I'd still coat it in resin and wax if I were you - it will snap the wood eventually anyway."

"Thanks," he said with a warm smile. He looked up at her over his shoulder, his eyes twinkling brightly and cheeks flushed, and Astrid couldn't help smiling back and putting her hand on his shoulder. But as always on wash day, this caused him to look away and tense up, and her hand slipped off him. "I'll write that down; I'll forget which order it was you said it otherwise," he added with a chuckle, taking the paper from her hand and adding a few runes with lines pointing towards quickly squiggled drawings to keep her instructions with the rest of the design.

"We really shouldâ€¦" she started, thinking of the water in the next room, hoping it hadn't cooled too much, and going through all the washing supplies in her mind to make sure nothing was out of place as the usual nervousness washed over her. Her nerves had mounted higher and higher every washday, and the reason why was rather obvious.

"Very well," Hiccup replied reluctantly, standing unaided and never looking at her as he walked towards the bathing room. The glowing coals of the warm emotion Astrid had been feeling were doused by his sudden distance. This had happened for every wash day since he had awoken, and it was only getting worse.

What was sad was that Astrid had been looking forward to these moments. Her mother had always told her that she had bonded with her father over the bath tub, during the first few months of their marriage as they had begun to know each other more, and trust had been born of habit as they grew used to each other in the wash tub, learning loved and hated traits that would be lived with later with a shrug, and speaking of all and sundry until the water cooled as they washed one another.

Hiccup on the other hand seemed firm in his desire to remain as distant from Astrid as possible on all things that were not the day-to-day of living in the same hall and living in the same village. The first time washday had come around his reaction to her unclothed body had been so severe that she had never dared to be completely unclothed since, always remaining in her shift as she shared the tub with him, because he hadn't looked her in the face for the following two weeks straight.

It was made worse by the fact that it wasn't only her duty, but her utter obligation to be here. He wasn't only her betrothed but also an injured member of her family. The Goethi had been very clear that the wound, not yet completely healed despite being burned shut and sutured carefully, could by no means be wet unless it was with the healing liquids and poultices she had provided. This led to Hiccup being completely unable to bathe on his own, even if he could somehow make it in and out of the tub with his metal leg missing and the slippery stone floor of that room.

Astrid swallowed her nervousness and moved towards the bathing room, closing the door behind her and kneeling to help him remove his leg as he struggled with it, leaning against the tub. She didn't dare look up at him and smile as she had the first few times she had done this - she'd only find his face turned to the side, stubbornly refusing to look at her for the duration of the bath.

Quickly and efficiently his leg was off, and she swaddled the metal in a rug to keep it from getting wet in the room's moisture. His trousers followed, and then she rose and helped him out of the green woolen tunic while making sure to keep him steady.

The tub had been built to suit Stoick's greater size, so that it felt almost like a small pool, even with the both of them sharing it. The step inside was a large one, problem Astrid had solved ages ago by putting a log in the instep. Together, they climbed - and hopped - to the edge of the tub, where Hiccup sat down and Astrid quickly climbed in, pushing the bathing stool behind him so he could just push back onto it. He did so quickly, swinging his good leg in after he'd sat down and sinking only partially into the tub as his bad leg rested on the ledge, dry and still swaddled in bandages.

Astrid had begun to speak out of nervousness, the silence of the room otherwise suffocating as the noise of sloshing liquid became too loud and jarring.

"Ruffnut will be over later," she said with a forced chuckle as she wet his back and hair using a wad of clean wool and lye soap. "Apparently, Woodnut's decided that since she has a name now, she can soil all the undies she wants. I've been trying to tell Ruff to use more moss against that poor baby's bottoms, but more moss is for

losers."

Hiccup chuckled, and it felt like a huge victory. "Let me guess, Fishlegs is backing away slowly and waiting for her to stop blowing things up before he says anything?"

"Actually, he begged me to lend a hand, which is why Ruffnut and her smelly bundle of love are going to join mum and I later, after I'm doneâ€¦" No! Don't mention the current activity! "... cleaning the tub out. Honestly, I think your father let Fireworm in with him this morning." Oh Freya have mercy, she managed to dodge that.

"I think you may be right," Hiccup chuckled again as he washed his own front, and Astrid rolled the lye soap between her palms and began lathering his hair. It had grown considerably lighter and redder since he had returned, a common side-effect of the soap they used on Berk, but Astrid couldn't say she didn't enjoy the shining strands of soft hair passing through her fingers. She angled his head backwards, careful not to get any lather into his eyes, and a thrill went through her starting at the centre of her chest and warming her skin outwards when he relaxed and leaned backwards. She massaged his skull with her finger pads and his eyes fell closed as he groaned.

It was only a moment, but Astrid immediately felt her heart skip and begin to beat faster as she watched him go slack under her hands. It was an unbelievable feeling, one she'd never had before even when they shared the bath, but it was a warmth beyond the bath water spreading all over her skin, like a blush travelling from her face to the tips of her toes.

Then he seemed to realise what he was doing and stiffened terribly, almost yanking his head out of her hands and pulling his own hair in the process.

"I got soap in your eyes, sorry!" Astrid said, to try to give him a valid cover and reduce the awkwardness. He stammered an accession and she quickly used the washing ladle to rinse the soap away from his face and hair. The warm feeling faded to an unsatisfying lull, like a cold cup of ale left too long on the Great Hall's counter.

His exit was quick after that, Astrid following with her sopping wet shift sticking to her skin uncomfortably. She helped him dress and put his leg on, then walked him across the slippery floor until he could find better purchase on the wooden floor of the main room.

He gave her a shy glance and a small smile over his shoulder, heading back towards the fire stiffly and showing no improvement whatsoever for all the soothing effects the hot water was supposed to have on sore and aching muscles. Astrid shut the door, turning back to the tub and entered the cooling water again, quickly washing her own hair before soaking a few of the more delicate linens in what was left of the soapy water.

She climbed out and undressed, peeling the shift off her skin and hanging it to drip and dry in front of the bathing room's fire. She wiped herself down and dressed quickly, braiding her still-wet hair with quick fingers and beginning once again the long process of emptying and cleaning the tub, gathering the wet linens and putting them up to join the shift. She opened the door and bustled into the main room, busying herself with food and gathering the clothing piles

for the next half hour as she waiting for her mother to come calling.

Hiccup groaned again from his place by the fire, the shorter winter days providing little light within the thick wooden wall of the halls. He bent his parchment towards the fire, his metal leg tapping impatiently.

"What is it?" she finally asked, wishing that he'd just look to her for help more than anything. He scowled and rolled one shoulder, lips curled inwards as he scrunched his nose in annoyance at whatever was on the paper.

"I'm trying to improve the pulley-system we have on the ship sails and constructions," he sighed, scratching at a drying patch of hair that was glinting in the firelight. "But I keep coming up against the same problem of weight - I have to try to find a way to make one pulley that's able to take the weight from a sack of grain to a full fishing net. But I can't be sure how much they'll hold until I test them, and _that_ won't be happening any time soon with â€¦" he huffed and waved a hand towards his leg as he tapped the metal, jostling it nervously.

"Well, we can try it once you're feeling up to it," she assured, but his scowl only deepened and â€¦ ah, was that a pout? It wasn't doing good things to her insides.

"I wanted to get it done before the Thing. That way we use them while we make the temporary shelters and take them down, and maybe we'll be able to show them off on the ships." He snorted. "Thuggory will be mad as a hungry gronkle that we one-upped him on the fleet again. We already have the better oar system."

Astrid smiled, watching him speak of the fellow heir of the Meathead tribe with a rather mischievous spark in his eyes.

"Try looping the wire? It will take more weight." Hiccup looked down at the parchment for a moment, but the furious scribbling that quickly followed made her smile to see his great mind at work again. "It will be nice to see them all again," she commented as she salted some fish. "It has been almost three moons. Do you think they will all come?"

"Thuggory and Heather will, I'm sure of it," Hiccup said, "And Cami. I'm not sure about Dogsbreath - he doesn't enjoy the din of this sort of thing - but he's of that age now. I don't think his father will let him stay behind."

Astrid opened her mouth to reply, but her mother knocked, her head peeking into hall with a merry look about her.

"Ah good, you're still here!" Astrid waved her in, and Brunhilda dropped her cargo of dirty laundry, which was not as huge as it used to be in Astrid's younger years. All of her various sisters-in-law had obviously been given the wolf's share, and now her mother took the most precious or easy pieces off to join her own daughter's loads. "Has our walking disaster arrived yet?"

"Oh no, Ruffnut's late," Astrid answered with a laugh she shared with Hiccup. She went to gather her own basket of washing-up, and dragged

a hand warmly across his back as she passed him. When he only smiled back at her, Astrid's chest lightened again. "Hiccup, I'll be by the river. Sorry to ask you this, but you'll watch the pot for me? It's only next to the grate so it shouldn't burn, but unlid it if it bubbles. Is that alright?"

"Do I get extra stew if I burn myself?" he asked innocently. Astrid laughed along with her mother at his blatant bribe, and Astrid punched his shoulders lightly in a way that made him pout and grumble, and caused her cheeks to colour at the sight of his slightly protruding lip.

"We'll see!" she replied with a cheeky wave, which he answered with a childish poking of his tongue. She was still laughing as she climbed down the hill with her mother, both laden with clothing, to go kidnap Ruffnut from her own personal domestic hell and take her to their corner of the river.

=0=

A taste, before the main course. Don't be fooled; it's not all sweetness and light. All the chapters will begin upload tomorrow and the story will be marked complete at the end of the run.

I hope you enjoy the ride. It's a 217,000 word one.

23. Meeting and a short deleted scene

A small note to warn everyone that the first one-shot of the third Edda has been uploaded. And under here is a deleted scene from 'Winter in LÃ-f's Holt', which was pillaged for some sentences, but was actually the original way in which the two lovers finally had the BIG conversation â€| back when Holt was supposed to be 5 chapters long. If you have not read the story after this one, please do not read this scene until you have as it contains spoilers.

=0=

â€|

"I'm uncomfortable with the fact that you've â€| cleaned me when I was peeing all over myself like an infant. I'm uncomfortable with the fact that you were taking my clothes on and off me while I was asleep because â€| no one's done that since my mother was around. I'm horribly uncomfortable that you've seen â€| all of this." He waved at himself. "We both know there's not much I have to offer. Well, even less now.

"But â€|" He folded his arms and rose to the balls of his feet - foot - uncomfortably. "I'm even more uncomfortable with the fact that you felt obliged to do all that. That you felt you had to care for me and clean me and offer to loâ€|" his voice faltered. He swallowed. "I â€| I'm uncomfortable that after all this time, I don't know how you feel about this arrangement. I don't know â€| what you want."

"I want to court you"

"You utter bastard, don't you dare turn this on me," she said in a hoarse voice. "I've waited for you for five years!"

"Because of the arrangement, because â€¦ Because of the contract," he shot back. His shoulders sagged as he looked at her beseechingly, unashamedly broadcasting his very soft and vulnerable inside. "Please, Astrid. I need to know."

"You need to know what!" she roared, and he was horrified to see a film of tears welling parallel to her bottom eyelash.

"I need to know if you want this." He waved his hand listlessly between them. "I really need to know."

She went red in the face like he'd pinched her, threw her arm backwards and took a swing at his head. The fact that she missed and he could dodge was alarming. The fact that he grabbed her and managed to hold her was even more so. When her head fell forward onto his chest and she gave a sob, it was terrifying.

"You bastard," she said, her voice breaking in the middle of the second word, and she didn't even resist when he finally gave into the temptation to squash her against him. He wasn't sure he would have been able to breathe if someone had hugged him that hard, but of course Astrid managed. "How dare you say stuff like that when you're the one who â€¦ you have someone waiting for you out there. Someone you want. 'The most beautiful woman in Midgard'!" There was a sob, and she somehow managed to elbow him in the ribs despite how tight he was holding her.

She may as well have struck him on the head. Her sobs tugged his heart in several different directions while at the same time setting it racing for the clouds. He felt like he was on Toothless.

"I'm holding her." There was a pause, then - "OW!"

"Don't play games with me, Hiccup Haddock!"

"I'm not!" She wiggled violently, but he held on tighter. "I'm not, I swear! I â€¦ I've been in love with you since I was twelve. Maybe younger. I don't know, I â€¦ All I know is that how I feel really isn't a question here." He was risking his life, possibly even a broken nose and broken teeth, but he didn't care. He bent down and kissed her head. "I, um, thought I was very lucky to come home and find myself engaged to you. It was like â€¦ Nana intervened, with Frigga and Freya together, for me." She wasn't saying anything. She wasn't saying anything. Oh Odin's breath, she wasn't â€¦ "But I really can't keep this engagement going if I don't know that you're â€¦ ok with it. At least ok with it, that you at least like me and aren't doing this just out of duty, and that you'll not be miserable and I'll watch you be miserable beside me while I lo-"

A sound kick to his good leg made him yelp and swear as the pain almost brought him to his knees. He would have gone down, too, but Astrid's arms came up under his armpits, and suddenly she was kissing him ferociously.

"Mmm! Mmm-mmm!" he tried for a moment to call her attention back to the situation and important conversation but then when one of her hands rose to cup his face and she managed to pry his lips open and

stick her tongue in, he forgot why it was even important at all when beautiful, beautiful Astrid was kissing him like â€¦ like â€¦ thoughts â€¦

No, no, he had to talk to her. Had to make it absolutely clear. He pulled away gently, making sure to hold her as close as possible.

"Astrid, look at your axe." He took it off the holster on her back and planted it handle-first into the soft dirt. He began to pass his finger along the hidden runes while watched her face carefully, and as her eyes either followed knowingly or widened, he found out which ones she'd discovered, and which ones she hadn't. When he ran his fingers on the DrÃ³ttkvÃ³tt she smiled at the first six lines. When he continued along the hidden verse in the design, however, her eyes went impossibly wide, staring at it for a few seconds before she turned to him. He returned the gaze nervously - until she literally devoured his mouth, and his brain clicked off completely the moment she gently bit his lip.

When she pulled back, he smiled at her foolishly. He regretted it a few seconds later. Her hand got free of his slackened grip, she swung back and slapped him a good one.

"That's for making me worry for nothing."

"Ow, ow, what! Are you never going to stop hitting me! Because I could totally-"

Her lips were back on him, and he lost his train of thought again until she pulled back for air.

"...Something," he said, his brain registering that he was about to speak, but not having enough free brain cells to process what. Especially when she was smiling at him like that.

"I can't say I love you. I'm not a liar." Ow. Ow, ouch. Oh right, that's what he was going to say, and why was she still smiling after saying something so horrible - she put a hand on the mouth that had been about to open to say something sarcastic and rather (probably) whiny. He flinched, but her touch was gentle this time, and moved away from his mouth to caress the rest of his face like she couldn't help it. "But I'm ok with this. More than ok with this. I 'at least like you', Hiccup Haddock. A lot. I'm not as far on the road as you are butâ€¦" her smile became a grin, and she had the audacity to kiss his nose cheekily, "... but my feet are certainly on the right path to reach you."

"You mean you â€¦ I mean, hypotheticallyâ€¦"

"Aha."

"So you wouldn't mind if I, if we, say, start behaving like a real, I mean, couple?"

Astrid's face became predatory.

"Good, so everyone will be clear. You're nothing else. You're a couple. With me."

"That makes no grammatical senseâ€|" She scowled bullishly at him.
"Buuut I understand what you mean perfectly. All this," he waved at himself, "belongs to Astrid."

"I like that," she said, smile reaching her ears as she leaned in.

"You would," he chuckled as he let her take his mouth again and do as she please with it. There was nowhere else he'd rather be, anyway.

...

"I ...I know. Gods, it's messed up. I had no right, no right at all to think of you in that situation, but â€| I couldn't help it!" He sighed, hand running down his face. "Astrid, you're honestly the only woman I've ever wanted. I know that I â€| practically shamed you, and it's more than a little creepy, and decadent, but â€| that's the fact, Astrid. I used to close my eyesâ€| and think of you."

"Hiccup â€| a man's fantasies are his own."

=0=

Not quite the chapter-long thing it eventually ended up becoming, isn't it? And like a complete silly hat, I forgot to put this up on the same day Meeting came out. I swear I'd forget where I put my hand if it wasn't screwed on â€|

End
file.